

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT:

QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN MEAN

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## CHAPTER I

### THE INITIATION OF THE QUEST

A cloak of mystery shrouds the long alliterative poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written in the Northwest Midland dialect of English about A.D. 1400. The author of the work remains anonymous despite medievalists' efforts to discover his identity, and the work itself remains an enigma--an entertaining, delightful hybrid of romance, anti-romance, comedy, tragedy, and religious instruction that encompasses at once the well established conventions of the English alliterative mode and forward-looking concepts on the appropriate handling of point of view, description, and characterization. The major focus of this work is the social and religious atmosphere in England at the time the poem was composed, for I believe the work is more than a piece written for entertainment and artistic expression. I see Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a patriotically English historical and social commentary on the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. In its patriotic use of English form and matter the poem is anti-French and therefore revolutionary in its departure from courtly modes which followed French patterns. As the poem presents the narrative

of the hero's quest for selfhood, it simultaneously traces background materials in a kind of search for a golden mean of human behavior.

To initiate a study of Gawain's quest to know himself, it seems appropriate to review certain recognized facts concerning the milieu which produced the poem, and concerning the poet. An understanding of these facts may enable the student of the poem to understand the relationships among the social conditions recorded by the poet, his reasons for employing the alliterative mode with its accompanying conventions, and his ideas and attitudes.

In relation to milieu, many critics have protested that a cultural approach is untenable and inapplicable to the work. Such a stand, deriving from the European Geistesgeschichte approach developed from Hegel and Dilthey, seeks to explain art, including its style, in terms of the "spirit of the age."<sup>1</sup> Some critics, Charles Muscatine in particular, argue that Sir Gawain shows a total detachment from current history.<sup>2</sup> However, to me

<sup>1</sup> Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Muscatine, p. 40.

the Geistesgeschichte approach appears very applicable to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Concerning the preservation of Sir Gawain, the poem survives in a single manuscript, Cotton Nero A.x., Article 3, in the British Museum. It is part of a group of four poems all accepted as being written by the same poet. All of the poems are written in the Northwest Midland dialect of English, and the three poems which precede Sir Gawain are titled Pearl, Patience, and Purity, or Cleanness. Some scholars attribute a fifth poem, Saint Erkenwald, to the same poet, but this matter is still the subject of scholarly debate. Each poem in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript concerns a religious theme; this religious aura is most evident in the dream allegory Pearl, which explores man's questioning of death and the afterlife in heaven. The other poems, Patience and Purity, have similarly religious themes; only in Sir Gawain, the splendid romance about King Arthur's nephew and fearless Knight of the Round Table, does the religious theme become somewhat obscured, seemingly subjugated to the pomp and circumstance of the tale of the peerless knight who comes to recognize his own imperfection only after going on a quest in search of a magical green knight.

In addition to the milieu which produced the poem

and the form of the manuscript, the poet who composed the work has been the topic of much scholarly discussion. Because these works have such a religious nature, many medievalists speculate that the Gawain poet was a cleric. He was obviously well read, possibly familiar with the Italian poets who we know influenced Chaucer's works--Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.<sup>3</sup> In addition, some critics speculate that sources for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight include the Middle Irish prose narrative Fled Bricrend (Bricriu's Feast), Chrétien de Troyes' Le Livre de Caradoc, and Lanzelet, translated from the Anglo-Norman by the Swiss poet Ulrich von Zatzikhoven.<sup>4</sup>

But the strongest evidence we have about the works of the Gawain poet, the highly alliterative Northwest Midland dialect in which they are written, suggests that the poet was not a Londoner like his contemporary, Chaucer. Whereas with a bit of practice and patience one may readily read Chaucer in the original Middle English, the poems of the Gawain group remain obscure

<sup>3</sup> Bernhard Ten Brink, History of English Literature, II, trans. William Clarke Robinson (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1893), p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Davis, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2nd. ed. (1925; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. xv-xviii. All subsequent quotations from the poem are in this edition and are cited in the text.

and very difficult to all but the most diligent student. Even with diligence, one often finds a modernization of the work essential in deciphering certain words, phrases, and even complete passages in Sir Gawain. And even such editors of the work as J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, Sir Israel Gollancz, and R. Morris of the Early English Text Society disagree on the exact meaning of certain words in the text. This difficulty in reading the text in the original plagues us, for whereas Chaucer's London dialect became the standard form of English and evolved into the English we speak today, the Gawain poet's dialect remains frozen in time, unchanged, unevolved, and problematic for present-day scholars of its most famous poems.

Like the identity of the poet, the exact location of the Northwest Midlands that produced the dialect used in Sir Gawain remains subject to speculation. Certain scholars place the dialect in Lancashire, while others conjecture it is Southeast Cheshire or Northeast Staffordshire.<sup>5</sup> Descriptions of the bleak and barren winter landscape mirror an intimate knowledge of North Wales and the Wirral. But, as identifying the exact locale in which the poet resided is not the object of

<sup>5</sup> Davis, pp. xiii-xiv.





Hige hillez on vche a halue, and holtwodez  
vnder  
Of hore okez ful hoge a hundreth togeder;  
Pe hasel and pe hazporne were harled al samen,  
With roze raged mosse rayled aywhere,  
With mony bryddez vnblype vpon bare twyges,  
Pat pitosly per piped for pyne of pe colde.  
(ll. 742-47)

All of these things indicate a rural poet writing about rural phenomena for a rural audience in the North-west Midlands. But despite its various regional characteristics, the poem is simultaneously a patriotic, self-consciously English work. The maker of Sir Gawain wrote a work about two truly English knights in another region, not in the London area. I contend that the work was deliberately written for barons and knights not only because it is likely that the poet was in the employ of a noble, but also because the poet wished to show that barons and knights were the true backbone of English society, worthy of praise and poetic immortality.

Having thus established the background against which

to press the poem this work will examine in some detail various historical and sociological materials of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the prevailing codes co-existing during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, including the chivalric code with its emphasis on courtesy; the vestiges of courtly love left over from the courts of love instituted by Marie de Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine; and the Catholic Christianity of the period. A discussion of the alliterative form itself will follow, and such stylistic components of the work as structure, description, point of view, and characterization will also be examined in relation to the alliterative form. In his handling of each stylistic component and in his treatment of the alliterative form, the poet departed from tradition to some extent and even anticipated modernistic techniques. Unlike elements of structure and considerations of time in numerous other medieval narratives, the structure of Sir Gawain is tightly woven, and time plays a vital role in the development of the tale. The poem is not episodic but rather closely adheres to a meticulously woven plan. In his descriptive techniques the poet departs from the traditional medieval practice of cataloguing and instead mixes spatial description with artful description. He does not hold to the point of view of the narrator alone, but rather shifts points

of view to allow insight into the minds of various main characters. And in the characterization of individuals, the poet uses the modern technique of developing character to replace the one-dimensional characters of many narratives of the medieval period.

Finally, Gawain will be examined in order to ascertain how his experience with the Green Knight alters his life, his self-perception, and the world of which he is a part.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, I believe, is a self-consciously English offering to a rural England in the midst of religious and social turmoil. At the same time, the work is a religious statement affirming grace over works as the key to salvation and initiating a quest toward perfect faith and spirituality. Gawain emerges from the poem as the poet's ideal of the golden mean, the "man for all seasons"--Christian, knight, and Englishman humbly aware of his own shortcomings. Sir Gawain remains one of the finest examples of hybrid romance entertainment and one of the period's greatest psychological studies of everyman on his quest for self-understanding produced in the Middle Ages.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PURSUIT OF THE QUEST THROUGH CODES

To understand the veiled social commentary made by the poet in Sir Gawain it is essential to consider the prevailing social and religious codes that operated in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The medieval period was a time of structure, of conformity to rules and to hierarchical arrangements. The feudal system with its interdependence of land-tilling serf and land-holding lord, provided the social, governmental, economic, military, and patriarchal framework for the period.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will examine the prevalent codes of the feudal age: the code of chivalry, especially of cortaysye; the motif of courtly love; and the all-powerful Catholic Christianity that, alongside feudalism, provided stability during the Middle Ages. Gawain adheres to each of these codes as he pursues his quest for personal and spiritual selfhood. It is important, then, to realize that each of these codes operated simultaneously during the period, each radiating influence upon the other codes and each taking on aspects of the

<sup>1</sup> Charles Moorman, A Knyght There Was (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 11.

other codes in order to insure its own survival in a state of social symbiosis. Chivalry, the product of the feudal system which gave rise to the warrior knights, will be the first of these codes investigated in depth.

Perhaps the most eloquent statement of the chivalric ideal--with its related rules of courtesy, truth, and loyalty--is preserved in the large body of Arthurian lore. Sir Thomas Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur specifically presents the epitome of chivalric virtues, the British King Arthur. This king admonishes his knights to avoid outrage and flee treason; to give mercy to him who begs mercy; to give succor to ladies, damsels, gentlewomen, and widows; and to avoid taking a woman by physical force.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the medieval knight was expected, as part of his knightly behavior, to be loyal to his peers and especially to his lord, to display prowess at arms, and to be generous to all persons.

But the social climate was unsettled in the late thirteenth century, about one hundred years before Sir Gawain was penned. Unquestioning acceptance of all of the actions and orders of the knight's ultimate liege, the king, was not necessarily universal in the England

<sup>2</sup> Moorman, p. 9.

of this period. The chivalric demand of absolute fealty to one's superior was sidestepped as early as 1215, when a group of barons forced the despotic King John to sign the Magna Carta libertatum, guaranteeing the barons their right to resist abuses of the "ancient law" of feudalism by anyone, king or lord.<sup>3</sup> A similar incident, more bloody and less famous than the barons' peaceful triumph at Runnymede, saw the baron Simon de Montfort leading a baronial uprising that began in 1258 and ended only with Montfort's death at the hands of Henry III's troops at Evesham in 1265. This uprising began as a protest of Henry III's "unscrupulous taxation by the curia, the summoning of favourites ('poiteirns') from Southern France to the court to fill the highest offices of state, and the large burden of taxation caused by Henry's ambition to obtain the Sicilian and Germanic crowns."<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, the English nobles saw the limitations and unrealistic aspects of certain points of chivalry, but they were not ready to relinquish all ties to the order despite the shortcomings of the code. At the close of

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Kinder and Werner Hilgemann, The Penguin Atlas of World History, trans. Ernest A. Menze, I (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 161.

<sup>4</sup> Kinder and Hilgemann, p. 161.

the tumultuous thirteenth century, the reign of Edward I brought back a certain flowering of trust and chivalric loyalty in England. Edward I strengthened the power of and respect for the crown by instituting certain reforms, including the codification of English common law in the "Yearbooks" (1292), drawing from local gentry the local administrators and officers of the peace, and confirming the right of Parliament to approve taxation and customs duties. Parliamentary petitions approved by the king became law, introducing the concept of legislative initiative.<sup>5</sup> So a measure of mutualism united lord and king once more at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and chivalry had overcome the assaults on some of its basic tenets to flourish, in a somewhat scaled-down, modified version, in the new century.

By the mid-fourteenth century, during the time in which the Gawain poet and Chaucer thrived, the court of Edward III served as a prototype of the new chivalry. Bernhard Ten Brink says, "This epoch formed a sort of 'Indian Summer' to the age of chivalry, and its spirit

<sup>5</sup> Kinder and Hilgemann, p. 189.



found expression in great deeds of war as well as in the festivals and manners of the court."<sup>6</sup> The period accepted the glitter of chivalric ideals without taking them too seriously; chivalry was no longer a fundamental law to be observed on pain of death, but rather an ornamentation, a set of prescribed behavior to complement the caste of knights who were no longer concerned primarily with waging war. From this narrowing and modification of chivalry comes its major fourteenth-century contribution: the art of cortaysye, especially courteous speech. And it is around this chivalric concept that the Gawain poet weaves his tale. However, the social commentary of the poet remains invisible unless we perceive the poet's dissatisfaction with this watered-down, ornamental survivor of true chivalry, which acts as a kind of placebo given to keep the knightly class on its toes with courtly appearance and diverted from social reformation through its preoccupation with cortaysye in manners and speech.

The rise of courtesy in the fourteenth century is suggested in The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, a Spanish work which outlines the characteristics of truth, honor, generosity, and courtesy. The work says

<sup>6</sup> History of English Literature, II, trans. William Clarke Robinson (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1893), 34.



target for her advances, for no man so courteous, so honorable, would dare act so discourteously as to flatly reject the advances of a beautiful, noble lady who also happens to be his hostess.<sup>9</sup> Gawain's response to the lady's praise and offer of her body to him is truly a gem of courteous speech, in keeping with his reputation for courtesy and in keeping with his desire to repulse her sexual advances:

'In god fayth,' quod Gawayn, 'gayn hit me  
bynkkez,  
Pa3 I be not now he pat 3e of speken;  
To reche to such reuerence as 3e reherce here  
I am wy3e vnworpy, I wot wel myseluen.

(ll. 1241-44)

Gawain here rejects his reputation as courteous "love talker" and ladies' man and instead pleads unworthiness of such a grand prize as his hostess's body. He uses the lofty language to avoid her snare, but his efforts are not wholly successful. The lady counters his argument with her own, again focusing on his Achilles' heel--reputation for courtly speech in the realm of romantic dalliance: "Bot hit ar ladyes inno3e pat leuer wer now3e / Haf 3e, hende, in hor holde, as I 3e habbe here, / To daly with derely your

<sup>9</sup> John Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 90.

daynté wordez" ll.1251-53)).

Even earlier, in the very first fitt, it is Gawain's courteous speech that intercedes in the confrontation between Arthur and the challenging Green Knight. Hearing the challenge of the knight, Gawain speaks up:

'Wolde ge, worpilych lorde,' quoth Wawan to  
 þe kyng,  
 'Bid me boze fro þis benche, and stonde by  
 yow þere,  
 Pat I wythoute vylanye myzt voyde þis table,  
 And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,  
 I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your  
 cort ryche.

(ll. 343-47)

One cannot but notice the courtesy of this speech, with its religious observance of the tenets of chivalric courteous and loyal behavior. Gawain praises his king, begs his permission to come to his side, and asks Queen Guenevere's permission to leave the table; all of this before he speaks to the Green Knight, whose boon Gawain thinks "not semly" (l. 347). Later, in the same scene, Gawain shows his humility, claiming that his kinship to Arthur is his sole claim to fame and begging his liege to allow him to answer the Green Knight's challenge for Arthur. Gawain claims he is the weakest and slowest in wit of all the knights of the Round Table, a device straight out of ancient rhetoric manuals

telling how to establish the ethos of the speaker by using self-effacing disclaimers regarding the speaker's wit. For Aristotle, in his Rhetoric, says that a man who mentions his merits and fails to show humility is guilty of shamelessness or boastfulness, both of which are undesirable traits.<sup>10</sup>

In regard to the courtesy of the other characters in Sir Gawain, critics are quick to point out that the Green Knight's stormy entrance into the banquet hall at Camelot is the height of discourtesy, as "Per hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster" (l. 136). The "mayster" did not dismount, knock upon the door, and wait to be led into the King's presence; he burst in, still mounted. And, in true comic form, laughing good-naturedly at the fearful silence brought on by the Green Knight's strange and sudden appearance, the poet says of the abrupt quiet of the banquet hall, "I ðeme hit not al for doute, / Bot sum for cortaysye" (ll. 246-47). In two simple, mildly satirical lines the poet makes a stab at what courtesy had become to the courtly crowd at Arthur's southern court of Camelot.

Despite the Green Knight's rude intrusion upon the

<sup>10</sup> Trans. Lane Cooper (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1932), p. 113.

Christmas festivities at Camelot, Moorman sees Arthur, as the host of the Green Knight, as behaving most discourteously when he addresses the knight, saying: "'Sir cortays knyȝt, / If þou craue batayl bare, / Here faylez þou not to fyȝt'" (ll. 276-78). For Arthur here offers a fight to the stranger, a Christmas guest at his court, whose sole request is to know the identity of the king, and who carries a sprig of holly (a sign of peace) as well as the bellicose ax.<sup>11</sup> It is perhaps only to be expected that the Green Knight's response would be less than perfectly courteous, as when the knight rejects Arthur's offer of a fight, saying of the courtiers he sees about him, "'Nay, frayst I no fyȝt, in fayth I þe telle, / Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdlez chylde'" (ll. 279-80).

Interestingly, in each case it is what is said that is perceived as either courteous or discourteous; speech is the medallion of courtesy in Sir Gawain. Ultimately, however, the broader ramifications of courtesy are uncovered, as the Gawain poet draws comparisons between the somewhat rude court of Arthur--rude in that the king greets the knight with a promise of battle--

<sup>11</sup> Moorman, p. 65.

and the apparently more courteous court of Bercilak at Hautdesert. Admittedly, Gawain the Courteous does not storm into the castle; he is led in by a kindly gatekeeper, who claims to know of Gawain already and who tells the questing knight that he is welcome for as long as he wishes to tarry. As Gawain is led across the drawbridge, a great company "kneled down on her knees vpon þe colde erþe / To welcum þis ilk wyȝ as worþy hom poȝt" (ll. 818-19). Surely these kneeling individuals at least appear to provide a more courteous welcome for Gawain than the silent and stunned Round Table Knights provided for the Green Knight, however churlish his own behavior seemed to them. This contrast in the behavior of the two courts may be seen as a criticism of King Arthur's court, for the Green Knight, with his token of holly, came as a Christmas guest to Camelot. He was decked out in traditional Christmas colors; even his horse was green and wore ornaments of gold. Despite the fact that he had not been invited, he was still a guest, in much the same way as the three Magi were unbidden guests of Mary and Joseph following the birth of Christ. His discourteous reception at Camelot is therefore inexcusable, and I believe the poet wished to show this unbecoming aspect of the royal court, allowing the veiled reference to the failings of the royal court.

of his day to become apparent upon close scrutiny of the contrasts between the two courts.

The lady of the castle seems to behave in a most discourteous way, however, when she presses Gawain to return her sexual advances, as when she quizzes him to explain why he, the Round Table knight best known for his skill with ladies and his expertise in the language of love, has refused to give her any of this brand of speech: "3et herde I neuer of your hed helde no wordez / Pat euer longed to luf, lasse ne more" (ll. 1523-24).

Here it seems that, once again, Gawain's reputation is his bane, and the lady does indeed seem to be pressuring him into engaging in his renowned love talking, whether he wishes to comply or not. However, the lady's upbraiding is not seen as so churlish if one considers that, first, she has assumed the role of churl planned by her husband and Morgan le Fay, and, second, that her ideas about chivalry are all wrong in the first place; the "loyal love" that she noted as the chief thing about chivalry would seldom come about in a liaison between a true knight and his host's wife.<sup>12</sup> So the lady, duty-bound and seemingly ignorant of the finer points of the "masculine" code of chivalric behavior, becomes merely child-like in her mistake, not truly discourteous.

<sup>12</sup> Burrow, A Reading, p. 92.



But the finest juxtaposition of courtesy and discourtesy appears in Fitt IV, when Gawain confronts the formidable Green Knight at the desolate Green Chapel. It is here that the exchange of blows must occur, for Gawain has remained true to his word and has come to face the Green Knight and to accept the blow that became his when he beheaded the knight at Camelot a year and one day before. When the ax swishes down to meet Gawain's neck, the peerless knight catches sight of it and involuntarily flinches. To this act the Green Knight addresses himself, in calculated, biting sarcasm:

And no þou fles for ferde er þou fele harmez!  
 Such cowardise of þat knyȝt cowþe I neuer here.  
 Nawþer fyked I ne flaze, freke, quen þou myntest,  
 Ne kest no kaulacion in kynges hous Arthor.  
 (ll. 2272-75)

Here the Green Knight musters every discourteous trick of rhetoric at his command--attacking Gawain personally, attacking the whole Arthurian court by an unflattering comparison with his own brave acceptance of the blow, and attacking the very knighthood of Gawain, all because of Gawain's human reaction to impending and certain death. In this instance the Green Knight grossly violates the code of courtesy, and the insult becomes even more blatant when one learns, at the close of the Green Chapel scene, that the Green Knight knew he was protected from



accusing the Green Knight of stalling out of fear for himself, reminds one of the lady's childish behavior toward Gawain as she attempted to shame him into exchanging some words of love with her. But the childish churlishness of Gawain intensifies as the insulted knight takes another swing and just grazes the neck of Gawain. Gawain instantly swings into action, the lethargy imposed by his exchange of blows compact shattered as he accepts the superficial wound as his repayment of a debt bound by the chivalric code of loyalty and the honoring of one's word. Instantly he draws a sword to defend himself and warns the Green Knight: "'Blynne, burne, of þy bur, bede me no mo!'" Courteous behavior, at last, has been subjugated to martial behavior and self-protection; at last Gawain becomes an exemplary knight of the old order, a warrior unconcerned with speech but very concerned with combat. Assuredly we do not blame Gawain for his swift action, coming on the heels of his loyalty-imposed inaction. It is as if the Gawain poet is suggesting that courtesy, the ruling vestige of the knightly creed, is powerful to a certain degree but that, in dire straits, action is the preferred response. I cannot but speculate that this is somehow a veiled reference to the baronial tendency toward action and the

royal court's bias toward speech as opposed to action. The crowning stroke of genius here lies in the poet's making his hero a knight, howbeit a knight attached to a royal court destined for ruin. But, again, these ideas remain to be explored in the following chapters, and we must here turn to the Green Knight's response to Gawain's sudden action.

The Green Knight does not exchange churlishness for churlishness but instead views the situation realistically and with both compassion and respect for the knight Gawain. He speaks to Gawain in a great voice, urging him:

'Bolde burne, on þis bent be not so gryndel.  
 No mon here vnmanerly þe mysboden habbez,  
 Ne kyd bot as couenaunde at kynges hort schaped.  
 I hyȝt þe a strok and þou hit hatz, halde  
 þe wel payed

(ll. 2338-41)

Thus the Green Knight praises Gawain's bravery and loyalty to the royal court that allowed him to undertake such a perilous mission. It seems that both Gawain and the court of Arthur are exonerated by Gawain's faithfulness in the exchange of blows covenant. But when the Green Knight reveals his identity as Bercilak and tells Gawain that he knows the origin of the green lace girdle, no amount of courteous or kindly speech can

reduce the shame Gawain feels for the little he lacked "and lewte . . . wonted" (l. 2366). Perhaps it is this dejection that leads Gawain into his diatribe against women, reminiscent of the debate between the nightingale and the thrush, using citation of Biblical women--Eve, Delilah, Bath-sheba--in support of his thesis that women are the root of all evil. This outburst is perhaps the most poignant example of Gawain's breach of the chivalric code, for he attacks women directly with his discourteous speech. Taking the idea of women as evil temptresses to its limit, Bercilak confesses that it was the old, withered woman, Morgan le Fay, Gawain's aunt, who master-minded the discrediting episode between her nephew and Bercilak's wife. The entire plot, according to Bercilak, was Morgan's attempt to terrify Guenevere and humiliate her husband's court. The plot pitted woman against woman, with Gawain caught in the fray.

Dejected and humbled, Gawain leaves Bercilak with the blessings and total forgiveness of the Green Knight. It was courteous speech and a reputation as a ladies' man that made Gawain a target for the Hautdesert trap, and the knight learns two lessons from the episode: that of humility, and that of "courtesy of speech which . . . is

two-faced; manners make good order, but to be civilised may mean to compromise truth."<sup>14</sup>

Like courtesy, courtly love became vested in the tenets of the chivalric code, but the rules of courtly love constitute the only aspect of this code that scholars today agree upon. The ritual of courtly love revolves around certain constants that influenced the literature of the Middle Ages: "the nobility of the lover, the sometimes insuperable distance between him and the lady, the exalting nature of his devotion, and the social context of the love."<sup>15</sup> It is upon these dimensions we shall now dwell, for if one is to understand and appreciate the nature of the temptress's threat in Sir Gawain, it is essential that one have some knowledge of the system of courtly love which became absorbed into the chivalric tradition as early as the twelfth century in France.

There is no dearth of theories to explain how the motif of courtly love found its way into the literature of the Middle Ages in Europe. Roger Boase lists these

<sup>14</sup> William Anthony Davenport, The Art of the Gawain-Poet (London: The Athlone Press, Univ. of London, 1978), p. 177.

<sup>15</sup> Joan M. Ferrante, George D. Economou, et. al., eds., Introd., in In Pursuit of Perfection (Port Washington, N. Y. : Kennikat Press, 1975), p. 5.

theories: (1) Hispano-Arabic, (2) Chivalric-matriarchal, (3) Neoplatonic, (4) St. Bernard-Marianist, and (5) folkloric-ritualistic.<sup>16</sup> Each of these theories carries the weight of plausibility as a source of courtly love. The crusades exposed Europe to the sensuous Arabic culture, which placed ~~premiums~~ upon women as seducers of men. The feudal chivalric code, with its emphasis upon loyalty and service, coupled with a matriarchal culture, could be seen as a probable source of courtly love also, as courtly love's rules dictate absolute faithfulness of the beloved to his lover and total subjection to her every whim. The Neoplatonic concept also has its merits as possible precursor of the courtly love tradition, as it advances a pseudo-religious source for the code. The Neoplatonic theory comes from the medieval interpretation of the philosophical writings of Plato, writings such as the Symposium and the Phaedrus. Both works discuss the nature of human love; both determine that such physical love is inferior to spiritual love. And in each work the idea is put forward that even noble human love is noblest when it is between two equals; in the case of classical Greece this

<sup>16</sup> The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love (Totowa, N. J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1977), p. 3.

would have to imply love between two males, for women were considered grossly inferior to men.' How ironic, then, is it that such writings could be seen as the paradigm for the idealization of women in courtly love literature. Further, it seems unusual that the true medieval mind would follow the reasoning of the ethereal Plato. The medieval mind craved order, explanation, codification; Plato defied such order and rigidity.

One point, however, must be conceded when musing on these ironies about Plato as a source for courtly love: Plato's concept of the spiritual ladder does suggest the hierarchical structure so dear to the medieval mind. The idea of eternally struggling to climb the spiritual love ladder must have sounded a responsive chord in the hierarchy-dominated period, and perhaps it is this striving for perfection that scholars consider when linking Plato to courtly love. Out of tune with the female-worship of courtly love, which sees man ennobled by the power of his love for his lady but in tune with the medieval Catholic Church's doctrine of imperfection is the real message of Plato's Symposium: one cannot climb the spiritual love ladder while remaining carnal.<sup>17</sup> So Platonic philosophy gives courtly

<sup>17</sup> Clive Staples Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 5.



love its goal, perfection through love, but seemingly little else. Not until the Renaissance in Europe, with its return to courtly love and female-adulation as a sort of religion, does the real convolution of the platonic theory of love occur, as it is set forth by such "courtly makers" as Castiglione, Sidney, and Spenser.

The St. Bernard-Marianist theory of origin for courtly love is an outgrowth of the Neoplatonic theory, as Bernard "Christianized" the platonic love. It was St. Bernard, in the twelfth century, who saw carnal love in a more mystical and sympathetic light than any previous church father had seen it. Augustine, perhaps in reaction to his own carnality prior to his conversion and priesthood, condemned in his writings carnal sexual relations, labelling them a burden of the original sin, showing sexual passion as a case in which the spirit is unable to control the flesh and becoming, therefore, characteristic of man's fleshly rebellion against God. Augustine saw the subjection of the spirit to the flesh as a kind of slavery and found sexual liaison between man and woman consequently flawed but necessary for procreation.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "Augustine of Hippo, Saint," The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia, 1974 ed.

But while not openly defying Augustine's stand on human sexuality, St. Bernard of Clairvaux modified Augustine's stand to include the spiritual aspect of the physical in love. While continuing to uphold the link between carnal relations and the original sin, Bernard platonized sex, so that the sexual union became a rung on the spiritual ladder, leading the couple to a better understanding of God's love as a result of their own sexual union. Thus, by loving each other, man and woman may reach a better understanding of divine love. However, even the mystical interpretation of love could not dissuade Bernard from his belief that such sexual love was still selfish.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to his mystic interpretation of human love, Bernard's treatise on Mariology, the study of dogma and doctrine concerning the Virgin Mary, can be seen as a possible source of courtly love. With his work Praises of the Virgin Mother Bernard became the champion for the Marianistic cult of the period.<sup>20</sup> The Cistercian order of St. Bernard placed its churches under the special protection of the Virgin Mary, and its

<sup>19</sup> Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> "Bernard of Clairvaux, Saint," The New Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropaedia, 1974 ed.

knights were the "Knights of Mary."<sup>21</sup> This point is especially relevant to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, as certain textual suggestions lead some critics to see Gawain as a knight under the special protection of the Virgin Mary.

Possibly through his sympathetic treatment of human love, St. Bernard did provide some impetus for courtly love's codification and acceptance in European literature. However, as courtly love has as a major tenet the qualification that true love cannot exist within marriage and states that only secret, extramarital love fits the courtly paradigm, it strains credulity to force any direct link between Bernard and the fin amour of the Provençal troubadours, except, perhaps, in its reverential glorification of all noble women by way of Bernard's tribute to the pure and perfect Virgin. Certainly, however, the Church would never sanction such an inference, connecting its great medieval philosopher to the courtly values that it maintained destroyed the spirit of the Church and the holy sacrament of marriage.<sup>22</sup>

Anticipating the Church's reaction to their extra-

<sup>21</sup> Boase, p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Stanley Brewer, Chaucer and His World (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), p. 81.

marital, secret variety of love, the early troubadours made a kind of religion on minne, or love, claiming that such love did not violate the codes of Christianity, as the lady is God's creation, and insisting that man could win divine favor and worldly honor by contemplating and revering such divine handiwork.<sup>23</sup>

The fifth and final source of courtly love to be considered here is the spring folk ritual. This, of course, draws on nature for its inspiration. Spring, the season for animal procreation, is also a time in which various male animals vie for the attentions of the female in order that procreation may occur. Thus, following this natural example, courtly love's emphasis on luring the female and competition between males can be seen as a continuation of the process in nature. Interestingly, however, courtly love's rules do not mention procreation as a reason for the existence of courtly love.

However the ideals of courtly love found their way into the literature of the Middle Ages, by the twelfth century they were entrenched in Provencal France. The court of Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, brought about the codification of the "rules"

<sup>23</sup> Barber, p. 89.

of courtly love. Andreas Capellanus, in The Art of Courtly Love, utilized the common medieval formula of lists to enumerate the various elaborations and restrictions of the ritual. Using these rules, Eleanor and Marie presided over mock trials, called courts of love, which were held to ascertain how ill or how well certain real and imaginary lovers abided by the new dicta of courtly love. Contrived cases were brought before the ladies and were tried in accordance with the laws of the courtly code. In The Art of Courtly Love, written in the form of letters to an older man advising him on the new rules of love, Lewis says that Andreas expounded upon the qualifications of the courtly lover: he must "be truthful and modest, a good Catholic, clean in his speech, hospitable, and ready to return good for evil."<sup>24</sup> One is struck to see the similarity between this code and that of chivalry, but these lofty traits existed in addition to the more mundane aspects of the courtly code: the paling of the lover in the presence of his love, the belief that one could not love a woman whose social rank was inferior to his own, the required secrecy of the love relationship, the required

<sup>24</sup> The Allegory of Love, p. 34.

faithfulness to the beloved, and the subjection of the lover to his lady's every command.<sup>25</sup>

The code of courtly love was, therefore, a kind of game in which playing properly and by the rules was its own reward.<sup>26</sup> And, as it turned upon the lover's continuous striving for idealized love, it could be rationalized as a form of platonic questing for "at-oneness" with God, as has been noted previously in the reference to the troubadours' insistence that such love was ennobling and pleasing to God.

The most familiar tales of courtly love are those of Tristan and Isolde and Launcelot and Guenevere, but vestiges of the concept can be found in many tales of the Middle Ages. Chrétien de Troyes' long romance Launcelot utilizes the concepts of courtly love in its tale about Launcelot's rescue of Guenevere from abductors, but, ironically, Chrétien himself seems to have disapproved of the inherent adultery of the system and, although a "poet of the courtois world, remains at heart bon bourgeois," despite his role in setting up

<sup>25</sup> Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, trans. J. J. Parry (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941). In the text I have summarized points drawn from disparate areas of the book.

<sup>26</sup> Joan M. Ferrante, "The Conflict of Lyric Conventions and Romance Form," in In Pursuit of Perfection (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), p. 136.

the courtly "system" in romance.<sup>27</sup> So the era produced poets who rationalized the propriety of the system and those, like Chrétien, who used the device of the system without believing in its noble virtues.

With this background one may approach the formulaic courtly love in Sir Gawain. Without the existence of a body of courtly literature to draw upon, the temptation of Gawain by the hostess at Hautdesert would be just another immoral seduction attempt by just another immoral and seductive woman. Potiphar's wife became the stock femme fatale in whose footsteps the lady of the castle follows, except the lady's behavior becomes more respectable, more justifiable, when considered in the light of courtly love. The lady of the castle is trading on Gawain's reputation for courtesy, which itself intersects the sphere of courtly love. When the lady comes to Gawain's bedchamber and offers her body to him, she is observing several of the rules of courtly love, and she expects him to know and respond to these actions in keeping with the code. The lady has come in secret, for her husband is away hunting, and her retinue is still asleep; the lady is married, and so the liaison would be extra-marital; and since the lady's love choice is a knight of

<sup>27</sup> Tom Peete Cross and William A. Nitze, Launcelot and Guenevere (New York: Phaeton Press, 1970), p. 69.

great nobility, she is observing the courtly rule regarding the station of one's lover. But in addition to all of those criteria, Gawain possesses still another lure: he is renowned far and wide for his expertise in amorous dealings with women and his "luf talkyng." Knowing these things, the lady even makes the first move, assuring the startled knight, whom she has just awakened, that they are alone in the bedroom:

And ~~now~~ <sup>3e</sup> ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one;  
 My lorde and his ledez ar on lenpe faren,  
 Oper burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,  
 Pe dor drawn and dit with a derf haspe

(11. 1230-33)

The lady certainly appears to be in violation of the rules of courtly love and courtesy when she initiates the discussion of love-making, for a lady is to be pursued but is not herself supposed to initiate the pursuit. But Burrow refutes this line of thought, maintaining that courtly love allows ladies to press their cases without becoming unladylike.<sup>28</sup> In the lady's defense, too, one must consider that she is dealing with a knight who purportedly knows the constructs of courtly love and who is not adverse to participating therein.

<sup>28</sup> A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,  
 p. 81.



But it is in this area that the Gawain poet strikes an original blow in his presentation of Gawain, for in Sir Gawain the knight cannot (or, more accurately, will not) go along with the lady's intent. The traditional Gawain of the French romances, and the Gawain of Chaucer's Squire's Tale, is quite a ladies' man, not above having some sexual dalliance with a willing lady. But the poet of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight uses that undesirable reputation to his advantage in his work, showing that the reputation, at least in this case, is undeserved. For if Gawain is ever really sexually tempted within his own psyche, it is never made obvious in the poem; his major concern seems to be how to remain courteous while repelling her offer. And perhaps, too, his fear of his impending death suppresses his libido. To be true to his courtesy, not because he wishes to kiss the lady, Gawain acquiesces to the lady's taunt that he prove his cortaysye by demanding a kiss from her. He says: "I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a kny3t fallez, / And fire, lest he displese yow, so plede hit no more" (ll. 1303-04).

One feels a true sympathy for Gawain in this instance, for he seems embarrassed by the lady's persistence, so out of keeping with courtly etiquette, as well as

morally offended by the adulterous intent of her visit, an intent which is made the more heinous by the fact that she is the wife of the host under whose roof Gawain has found shelter from the winter cold.

Each of the three temptation scenes plays upon this same dilemma: Gawain's desire to remain simultaneously courteous and chaste. But because Gawain does not yield to the sexual advances of the lady, the tests appear to center on his betrayal of courtesy rather than on his betrayal of chastity. The trial becomes a matter of chivalric virtue, courtesy and fearlessness, not of Christian conviction. The lady has used the web of courtly love and love-talking to ensnare him, and when Gawain eventually accepts the green lace girdle he does so not in the spirit of a lover accepting a love token from his clandestine love, but rather that the girdle, with its purported magical properties, may save his life when he faces the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. For the lady, perceptive that Gawain will not rise to her courtly bait, astutely appeals to the man's fear of death and his desire to live through the conflict with the Green Knight. She switches her tactics, from appeals to courtesy and courtly love, to a promise that the magical green lace assures that any man wearing it "my<sup>3</sup> not be slayn for."

sly<sup>3</sup>t vpon erþe" (l. 1854). In this instance, that appeal to Gawain's love for his life is the charm, and he accepts the lace under the pretense of chivalric honoring of the lady's request of him. So the lady conquers vicariously, not by her use of the courtly or chivalric codes, but rather by her psychological insight into human nature: the love of life is great, even in great men like Gawain.

The failure of courtly love in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is perhaps not so unusual, for certain scholars contend that even Andreas Capellanus, for all his work codifying courtly love's mystique, wrote his Art of Courtly Love with tongue in cheek. D. W. Robertson, after careful scrutiny of Andreas' works, has concluded that the writer is being ironical in his writings on courtly love, producing a jeu d'esprit by rewriting Ovid's Art of Love for his own time and in one of the period's own genres.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, Lewis contends that the fault of courtly love is not in the way it is handled by Andreas (whose work Lewis considers a serious, not a satirical, effort). Lewis claims that Andreas sees love as the source of everything, in saeculo bonum. And therein lies the fault; the code fails because of its

<sup>29</sup> E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Myth of Courtly Love," in Speaking of Chaucer (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 159-60.

worldliness.<sup>30</sup>

Earlier critics, too, pass their judgment on the viability and propriety of courtly love, and they, products of the age in which the Gawain poet lived and wrote, speak most eloquently. Chaucer, in the Book of the Duchess and Troilus and Criseyde, demonstrates the sad fruits of passionate love: "a loss of courage, moral integrity, and chivalric virtue."<sup>31</sup> Somewhat later, near the end of the fifteenth century, Malory's Le Morte D'Arthur, tracing the tragic fall of Arthur's court to Mordred's illicit craving for his step-mother Guenevere and the courtly liaison between Guenevere and Lancelot, bemoans what courtly love has done historically. He shows how courtly love degenerated, and what was "meant to be a force for good in society, instead destroys society."<sup>32</sup>

I accept these two artists' views as adequately expressing the views of the Gawain poet on courtly love. Gawain, while attempting to comply with the terms of chivalry, flatly rejects the offerings of courtly love. The almost perfect knight accepts the girdle to save his

<sup>30</sup> The Allegory of Love, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Boase, p. 112.

<sup>32</sup> Ferrante, p. 173.

life and in so doing rises above the pitfalls of both courtesy and courtly love; the lesson he learns, ultimately, comes from neither code. Instead, Gawain learns of his own spiritual frailty and his failing under the Christian code. Ferrante observes that the genre of the medieval romance was divided into two spheres: the Arthurian sphere, in which courtly love operates, and the Grail sphere, in which there is no room for sexuality of any kind. She contends that what makes Sir Gawain unique is its synthesis of those two spheres.<sup>33</sup>

From the Arthurian, chivalric world, with its emphasis on courtly love and courtesy, to the Grail world, with its focus on the spiritual, we now turn our attention. The one constant element of medieval life was the centrality of the Church. In an era when hierarchies structured every aspect of daily life, the Church occupied the highest echelon of the hierarchical ladder. In A.D. 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne "Romanorum gubernans imperium"<sup>34</sup> instituting a bond between church and state and placing the higher authority in the hands of the Pope. Charlemagne came to view his rule as by anointment from the Pope, thus rejecting the pagan concept

<sup>33</sup> Ferrante, p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> Atlas of World History, p. 123.

of rule by dynasty. Charlemagne deemed the protection of the Church to be his responsibility as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; he consequently set himself up as the head of the Church in the newly-formed theocracy.<sup>35</sup> This bonding of Church and king became the accepted order, and the link cohered with only minor ruptures until Henry VIII's definitive breach with the Catholic Church in 1533.

Consequently, although kings changed (and they did so with alarming frequency), the Church remained. Prudent kings, regardless of how religious they were or were not, had a healthy fear of opposing the Church, and those monarchs who did so often fell from political power as a result of the Church's retaliation or as a result of the people's indignation. Henry II's attempts to limit the court power of the Church in trying its clergy precipitated the clash between himself and Thomas á Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. After the murder of Becket by Henry's supporters, only the king's open grief and stringent public penance and his petitioning the Pope for Becket's canonization prevented a violent reaction of the people to the martyrdom.

The secular and religious unrest of the period

<sup>35</sup> Atlas of World History, p. 127.

resulted from questioning by many persons of the principle of the divine right of kings which had long prevailed. Such events as the crusades, the forcing of King John to sign the Magna Carta, and the Babylonian Captivity (a clash between king and Church instigated by Philip IV of France)<sup>36</sup> and Wyclif's doctrine defying transubstantiation indicated that such unrest did indeed exist.

Against this tumultuous backdrop we must consider Sir Gawain. The period, with its questioning of doctrines that had previously been accepted as religious absolutes, was a period of religious skepticism. Faith alone was not empirical; it could not prove any religious fundamental such as divine grace or the power of things unseen. This skepticism encouraged a great era of mysticism and the subsequent introspective consideration of the individual and his relation to the world.<sup>37</sup> This consideration of the individual seems to be the concern of the Gawain poet as he weaves his tale of one knight's contemplation of his impending death, culminating in his eventual realization of his own moral frailty; Gawain learns to believe in the unseen, unempirical grace of God.

<sup>36</sup> Atlas of World History, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Brewer, p. 166.





then states, "'3e, of þe chepe no charg,' . . . /  
 'As is pertly payed þe chepez þat I azte'" (ll. 1940-41). Gawain knows that not the whole debt is paid, as he has failed to honor the exchange of winnings contract he made with Bercilak. He fails the contract in not surrendering to his host the green girdle, and he lies to cover up this breach.

But the pentangle symbolizes other religious attributes in addition to truth; its five points represent various other virtues of Gawain, who "watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez / And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres" (ll. 640-41). Additionally, the number five represents the five wounds endured by Christ on the cross and the five joys Mary felt in her child. Finally, the pentangle signifies the five chivalric virtues: "Watz fraunchyse and felazschyp forbe al þyng, / His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer, / And pité, pat passez alle poyntez" (ll. 652-54).

This detailed description of the pentangle on Gawain's shield fulfills two functions: it leaves little doubt that the Gawain poet was a man intimately concerned with religious virtues and religious symbolism, and it further bonds Christian code and chivalric code, for the pentangle is a symbol of both codes.

Gawain's goodness and obedience to God are further noted during his bleak wintertime journey through the Wirral wasteland. The wild beasts and giants Gawain encountered would have killed him, "Nade he ben dugty and dry<sup>3</sup>ge, and Dry<sup>3</sup>tyn had serued" (l. 724).

And when the chill and desolation wrecked his spirits, Gawain "To Mary made his mone, / Pat ho hym red to ryde / And wysse hym to sum wone" (ll. 737-39). The Christian knight does not lose his faith when he encounters great physical trials, but rather uses his faith as a source of succor. The cult of Mary was popular during the period in which Sir Gawain was written, and it is interesting to note the numerous occasions, as in his "moan to Mary," on which Gawain turns to the Virgin; he seems to be one of the knights of Mary.<sup>38</sup>

When the trial becomes sexual, however, Gawain does not pray for the Virgin's guidance but rather relies upon his own courteous speech and tact to deflect the lady's advances. Perhaps it is because on neither of the first two occasions does Gawain's chastity seem imperiled. But on the lady's third visit, when she comes to him with hair flowing loose and breast and back bared,

<sup>38</sup> A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 194.

the Virgin is again brought on the scene, this time by the poet narrator, who admits, "Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir kny<sup>3</sup>t mynne" (ll. 1768-69).

Again we are told that Gawain is Mary's knight and as such under her special protection.<sup>39</sup> The poet imposes Mary on the scene, even though Gawain does not in this instance invoke her aid himself. Perhaps the poet is here giving some hint of Gawain's frailty and susceptibility, for Gawain trusts in his own moral willpower (and, ultimately, in the promised magic of the girdle) rather than calling out for divine help. One must wonder why Gawain feels a need for the protection of the girdle, for earlier in the wasteland, Gawain has prayed for lodging for the night and instantly has spied the castle of Bercilak looming ahead. Having thus learned the power of his prayers, Gawain could, it seems, conclude that God would protect him from the Green Knight. Perhaps this weakness of faith is another sin of which Gawain is guilty.

But even if lacking faith for the ultimate test, Gawain continues his acts of religious obedience, and after each visit the lady makes to his bedroom, Gawain rises and goes to church as soon as she has gone. On.

<sup>39</sup> Spearing, p. 194.

the first two occasions, when all he has received is an innocent kiss, the knight goes to mass. But after the lady's third, and more lethal, visit, Gawain goes to church and seeks out a confessor. Of course, at this time Gawain has the green girdle in his possession, and one wonders if Gawain must not realize the impropriety of the token: it is a breach of his commitment to honor his host, and it is also a token of his own "little faith." Logically, however, the reason for Gawain's confession is that he realizes he is about to die at the hands of the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, and he wishes of the priest, "~~Pat~~ he wolde lyste his lyf and lern hym better / How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye heþen" (ll. 1878-79).

Much has been made of this third visit to the chapel, for some critics maintain that the confession of Gawain is, in this instance, false and invalid as the Augustinian doctrine holds that one cannot be forgiven of the sin of covetousness if one still possesses that for which the crime was committed.<sup>40</sup> This line of reasoning would clearly find Gawain guilty of a false, insincere confession--a dire sin indeed.

<sup>40</sup> Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 106-07.

However, other critics here rush to Gawain's defense, claiming that the suddenness of Gawain's acceptance of the girdle prevents Gawain from fully realizing his sin until he is confronted with the whole story of his temptation when he meets Bercilak at the Green Chapel.<sup>41</sup> This explanation certainly makes sense if one puts himself in the place of Gawain, a knight about to be beheaded and sworn to accept the lethal blow without defending himself. But Burrow, who finds the confession invalid in certain aspects, concedes that the confession acts as a link for the chivalric and Christian virtues, forming "a single code--courtesy and cleanness, fellowship and faith."<sup>42</sup> The falsehood of the confession, then, becomes less a sin against God than an unsuccessful attempt to weld chivalry and Christianity into a single code.

The true confession, that of Gawain to the Green Knight in the tale's final fitt, is a more complete and valid confession than the one Gawain made at the castle prior to setting off for the Green Chapel. In

<sup>41</sup> Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Review, 62 (1967), 8.

<sup>42</sup> A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 105.

this confession Gawain laments:

For care of þy knokke cowardyse me tazt  
 To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to  
 þat is larges and lewte<sup>forsake,</sup> þat longez to  
 kny<sup>3</sup>tez.  
 Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben  
 Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe<sup>euer</sup> bityde sorze  
 and care!

(ll. 2379-84)

The mortified knight confesses fully, omitting no sin he considers himself guilty of. But after Gawain's soul-baring speech, the Green Knight laughs and assures Gawain, "Þou art confessed so clene, beknownen of þy mysses, / And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe poynt of myn egge" (ll. 2391-92). The Green Knight accepts Gawain's confession as valid and claims that Gawain's receipt of the blow of Bercilak's ax was ample penance for his sins. The matter should, therefore, be closed, as Gawain has followed the appropriate steps for the forgiveness of sins. One small problem, however, remains to complicate the final confession: Gawain has confessed to a layman, a non-priest. Of course, as it was Bercilak who was wronged by Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle and his failure to give the girdle to Bercilak in fair exchange for the fox Bercilak brought to him, one may contend that the sin was absolved by Gawain's confession to the Green

Knight. Critics point out that Hautdesert, which means "high wilderness," is a kind of otherworldly hermitage for the errant knight Gawain. In the context of the closing events of the poem, Bercilak, the lord of the castle, seems to become a Christian, religious symbol, a type of holy hermit.<sup>43</sup> Acceptance of this argument would allow one to find the confession valid. John Burrow sees the confession as a social nuance of the era in which the poem was composed, for the fourteenth century "saw much controversy on the subject of the sacrament of penance . . . the conditions under which confession to a layman was valid."<sup>44</sup> Once again, the Gawain poet brings the controversies of his time into his work, making it as much a testimony of his own period as a tribute to the by-gone Arthurian Age. We are never told for certain if the confession is valid or not; the poet leaves that question for the reader to answer. But Gawain's humility upon realizing his sins is proof enough to me that his confession is sincere and therefore worthy of forgiveness by a forgiving God.

On the subject of the poet's introduction of the

<sup>43</sup> Alice E. Lasater, Spain to England (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974), p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Philology, 57 (1959), 77.

religious controversies of his time into the text of Sir Gawain, one final observation must be made.

Spearing contends that the poet showed a remarkable knowledge of grace, as defined by St. Augustine and the English theologian Thomas Bradwardine. Consequently, it is this theme--grace over nature--that becomes a central pivot upon which the religious interpretation of the poem turns.<sup>45</sup> Larry Champion points out that the "great religious question of the fourteenth century [was] whether salvation is achieved by divine grace or by human merit."<sup>46</sup> A revival of the self-determination controversy begun by the fifth-century monk and theologian Pelagius operated in the fourteenth century, probably as a result of the similarly controversial questioning of religious doctrines by Wyclif. The pelagianistic idea was that man is born innocent and so does not need baptism. Reason, free will, and merit were held by the pelagians as the key to salvation.<sup>47</sup>

From Gawain's contrition for his fall, we learn that the maker of this poem confirms the traditional Church

<sup>45</sup> The Gawain-Poet, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 28 (1967), 415.

<sup>47</sup> Champion, p. 424.



doctrine that God's grace, and not man's own nature, is the key to salvation; if good Gawain could err, so could all lesser men. Only God's grace guarantees man's rise above sin, and forgiveness when he does sin. Sir Gawain "invokes the classic metaphor of human existence--that man stands midway between the angels and the animals, partaking of both natures, and capable of moving in either direction."<sup>48</sup>

Even though the Green Knight and the king and knights at Camelot laugh at Gawain's grief over his sin at Hautdesert, the poet uses these responses to represent the folly of man's questioning of grace as the key to salvation. Some critics contend that only Gawain seems to have learned the intended lesson from his sin; only Gawain seems to realize the truth of the traditional doctrine. And, because of this realization, Gawain rises, again, above the others and regains his position as the best knight of the court.

The exploration of the codes of chivalry, courtly love, and Christianity in this chapter shows how the romance of Sir Gawain exemplifies the fourteenth century's attitude toward the knight and chivalry. The poet's work mirrors a "greater emphasis on religion at the"

<sup>48</sup> Shedd, p. 4.

expense of chivalry . . . the Arthurian court and its code are invariably subjected to moral criticism."<sup>49</sup> Gawain sees that worldly codes such as chivalry and courtly love are human and as such subject to decay and decadence. Only grace from God remains constant and incorruptible. Moorman calls Gawain's quest "a rite de passage by which Gawain is initiated into a full understanding of himself and his code of values."<sup>50</sup> So in his quest to become God-like man imposes order; courtly love, feudalism, courtesy, and Christianity all impose order.<sup>51</sup> But in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the best order comes from God, and this is the moral lesson which the almost-perfect knight has learned by the end of his quest.

<sup>49</sup> Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 246.

<sup>50</sup> A Knyght There Was, p. 62.

<sup>51</sup> John Gardner, ed., The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 12.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE PURSUIT OF THE QUEST THROUGH STYLISTICS

What has been designated the alliterative revival in England during the fourteenth century was really not so much a revival as a sudden proliferation of a style that had been a part of the English poetic tradition since the Old English period and that in the hands of the Gawain poet became a patriotic expression of his preference for English over French metrical patterns. Old English poetry, composed for oral presentation, made use of alliteration for its mnemonic and aural qualities, and certain scholars contend that the oral-formulaic tradition was a continuous element which led directly to the development of the alliterative verse in Middle English.<sup>1</sup>

As Sir Gawain is composed in the English alliterative style, this chapter will explore various aspects of the form with its high rhetorical style in terms of how the form contributes to the overall effect as it enhances the patriotic spirit of the poem. Additionally, it will examine such stylistic components of Sir Gawain as

<sup>1</sup> Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 118.

structuring techniques, description, point of view, and characterization. Thus the narrative of Gawain's quest for selfhood becomes a literary quest of the relation of stylistic elements to the material of the poem.

In fourteenth-century England there were basically two poetic camps: the southern (as evidenced by Chaucer) and the northern (as represented by the Gawain poet). Generally more traditional and less influenced by French stylistics than their southern contemporaries, the northern poets of the period tended to favor a higher rhetorical style, in the tradition of Cicero and early medieval rhetoricians like Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Features of the medieval high style include a great reliance on assonance, alliteration, consonance, ornamentation, and repetition. Benson contends that the alliterative revival was in large part due to the discovery by the northern poets that the alliterative form lends itself beautifully to such a rhetorical style.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Benson points out that all types of poetry flourished in fourteenth-century England and argues that the alliterative form was not the mark of backward or unsophisticated poets but, rather, the work of a select group who composed for a highly sophisticated audience that could understand

<sup>2</sup> Art and Tradition, p. 163.

the specialized diction and syntax of the form.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this argument, it appears that the poet's use of the alliterative form was a deliberate choice. First, the form is native English, and, second, the poet obviously considered his Northwest Midlands baronial audience to be sufficiently sophisticated to appreciate the subtleties of the form.

To ascertain how the poet pursued his quest for the good English form, one considers the pattern of the poem itself. Sir Gawain is comprised of 101 stanzas, each stanza containing four-stress alliterative lines with five short lines rhyming ababa at the end of each unit. The number of unrhymed lines varies from twelve to thirty-seven lines per stanza. Each long line consists of two half-lines; the natural pause that separates the two half-lines is termed the caesura. In Middle English verse the alliterating syllables occur frequently, and the iambic and anapestic meters generally rise.<sup>4</sup> Alliterating sounds tie the first and second half-lines, as at least one

<sup>3</sup> Art and Tradition, pp. 122-24.

<sup>4</sup> Benson, p. 112.

alliterating sound must fall in each half. Interestingly, these alliterating sounds nearly always begin stressed syllables; this feature is obligatory in Old English form. The structure of the long line depends on the number of strong and weak elements in the line; the strong elements are the stressed syllables or "lifts," and the weak elements are the unstressed syllables or "dips."<sup>5</sup>

The long lines carry the narrative, giving details and the necessary information, whereas the short lines often hold the surprise elements, as when the color of the fantastic visitor to Camelot is revealed. The man's features were

ful clene;  
 For wonder of his hwe men hade,  
 Set in his semblaunt sene;  
 He ferde as freke were fade,  
 And oueral enker-grene. (ll. 146-50)

The five short lines employ the bob and wheel device. The bob consists of only one or two words, and the wheel consists of four rhymed alliterative trimeter lines which follow the bob.<sup>6</sup> The bob rhymes with the second and fourth lines of the wheel. Also, the number of lines in

<sup>5</sup> Norman Davis, Appendix, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2nd. ed. (1925; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Alice E. Lasater, Spain to England (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1974), p. 171.

the bob and wheel remains a constant five no matter how long the strophe it concludes. The bob and wheel device is a constant throughout the poem, and as it signals an abrupt change in meter and often allows the introduction of some fantastic or surprise element to the narrative, Benson says of the bob and wheel that "the sting is in the tail."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the formulaic bob and wheel device, the poem employs verbal devices: archaic poetic diction, phrasal and clausal periphrases, and the absolute adjective. The use of absolute adjectives such as "patientyle" creates additional synonyms and gives a directness and force to the vocabulary. Additionally, the use of the absolute adjective allows the poet to color his vocabulary with custom-made words. The absolute adjective is used for objects, animals, and people, and it prevents the repetition of the same synonym over and over.<sup>8</sup> In addition to avoiding boredom through the repetition of synonyms, the invention of new synonyms and the use of archaic synonyms often enhances the alliteration of the line. Furthermore, groups of archaic and elevated

<sup>7</sup> Art and Tradition, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Benson, p. 129.

synonyms appropriate to characters representing the various social castes were learned by the poets of the time; therefore, the selection of a certain word to describe a specific character was often "a conscious attempt on the part of the alliterative poets to idealize and typify their subject matter."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Green Knight is called an "aglich mayster," and Gawain is called a "knyȝt" early in the poem. This distinction in terms assures that no one can mistake which of the two is the nobler. However, just as the poet shows social elevation by his choice of adjectives in describing the two men early in the poem, the poet shows the gradual movement toward equality of the two, equality that has come about as a result of the action of the poem. When, in line 2322, the poet calls Gawain "burne" (a common term for man), the poet indicates that Gawain's status has slipped a bit. Previously the poet had used the word "burne" in describing the Green Knight, generally choosing a more noble synonym to describe the hero Gawain.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, through his word choice the poet shows as well as tells that through his actions Gawain is moving toward

<sup>9</sup> Marie Borroff, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, Ct.: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Benson, p. 143.



common humanity. So the selection of synonyms is a commentary on the action and theme of the poem as well as an alliterative and rhetorical device.

There are approximately 2,650 different words in Sir Gawain, excluding the fifty-five proper names. Some of these words have obscure origins, but about 250 are Scandinavian, and about 750 are French. Most of the French words refer to common concepts, but many of the Scandinavian words refer to more complex concepts and are not words widely used in the English spoken during the period in which the Gawain poet wrote. Few pronouns, conjunctions, or prepositions in the poem are Scandinavian in origin. Old English words used in the work include the synonyms for man: mon, kniȝt, noble, prince, burn, freke, gome, hathel, lede, renk, schalk, segge, and wyȝe.<sup>11</sup>

From the smaller units of the word and the line, structuring extends to the entire work. The same kind of periodic, bracketing frameworks that exist in and control the sentences dominate the poem. Numerous bracketing devices occur, among which are the several feast scenes, both at Camelot and at Hautdesert, the

<sup>11</sup> Norman Davis, ed., Appendix, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2nd ed. (1925; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 138-39.

parallel between the three hunting scenes and the three temptation scenes, the two "beheading" scenes, and the numerological sequences (the five's--the five points of the pentangle, the five joys of Mary, the five wounds of Christ; and the three's--the three hunting scenes, the three temptation scenes, the three blows of the ax). Similarly, the juxtaposition of antithetical elements is such a unifying device. Such antitheses occur in the description of the passing of the seasons (ll. 516-31) or in the contrasting descriptions of the beautiful young lady and the ugly old lady at Bercilak's court.<sup>12</sup> The alliteration heightens the dramatic effect of this comparison of opposites:

Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were,  
 For if þe ȝonge watz ȝep, ȝolȝe watz þat oþer;  
 Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,  
 Rugħ ronkled chekez þat oþer on rolled;

(ll. 950-53)

It is interesting to note in the above passage how the Gawain poet has handled the description of the two ladies. For in Sir Gawain the traditional rhetorical component of descriptio is not the conventional catalogue but rather the description by contrast. The poet may

<sup>12</sup> Benson, p. 150.

have realized that the catalogue lacked moving power, and, as the vitality and verisimilitude of the action depend on effective descriptio, the poet chose to dynamize the detail by the use of antithesis.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, the description and the symbolism of the shield and the green gridle suggest another use of opposites, in this case the "inescapable conflict between chivalry and Christianity."<sup>14</sup> Significantly, the description of the pentangle takes a total of fifty lines, and its symbolic meaning is very carefully spelled out for the reader. However, the poet says of the green girdle only, "Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped, / Nozt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngrez" (ll. 1832-33). Here two lines are devoted to the description of the girdle, and no attempt is made to develop the symbolic aspect of the lace. Even when Gawain is being armed to ride out and meet the Green

<sup>13</sup> Derek A. Pearsall, "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Review, 50 (1955), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Speculum, 39 (1964), 431.

Knight at the Green Chapel, all we are told of the green lace is that:

3et laft he not þe lace, þe ladiez gifte,  
 3at forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymself.  
 Bi he hade belted þe bronde vpon his balze  
 Penn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute.  
 haunchez,

(11. 2030-33)

Perhaps through this omission the poet hoped to impress upon his readers the great significance of the girdle, for although he wears the pentangle proudly on his shield for all to see, Gawain wears the lace on the inside of his garments so that it is not so readily visible as the pentangle. The poet seems to be exploring the differences between the inward and the outward appearances of virtue and honor, and in this instance Gawain's outward appearance of virtue is somewhat sullied by his inward flaw--taking the green girdle in order to save his life.

Concerning the juxtaposition of opposites, Howard contends that the juxtaposition is a feature especially encouraged by the alliterative style, and he cites examples such as "bliss and blunder" and "brittened and brent" to illustrate how the poet combines alliteration and opposition.<sup>15</sup> Howard says that this juxtaposition

<sup>15</sup> "Structure and Symmetry," p. 431.

of opposites sustains the structural unity of the poem. Further, John Gardner maintains that the relationship between opposites and the system of parallels that operate in the poem are thematic and symbolic but not necessarily causal.<sup>16</sup> To me the juxtaposition of opposites appears to be a kind of dialectical scheme in which opposites are shown, often side by side, in order to enhance the literal and symbolic significance of each character, concept, or scene. Such use of dialectic for reasoning was a common medieval device, learned from the classical writings of Plato and Aristotle. Therefore I contend that the device serves several functions at once: structural, thematic, symbolic, and rhetorical. What emerges from one's study of Sir Gawain is that the work is organic and that the structure and the narrative work together so perfectly that it is impossible to ascertain which dominates which, if in fact such domination exists.

Similarly, the use of different points of view and both the artistic and natural descriptive order show how the Gawain poet breaks with romance tradition and appears almost modern in his craft. The poet uses an "eye-of-

<sup>16</sup> The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 45.

the-camera" technique which allows him to set his characters in motion. The viewpoint shifts as the camera follows the characters, thus allowing various angles and close-ups.<sup>17</sup> The narrator uses the omniscient point of view for Gawain and the limited dramatic viewpoint for the Green Knight; this pattern fits the narrative purpose of the poem, for we know all about Gawain; he is the Camelot constant. For Gawain was one of the most popular knights of Arthur, and his life, travels, and exploits are recorded in numerous tales. But we know nothing of the Green Knight until the end of the poem; he is the mysterious element, not a common character in Arthurian lore. In his description of the Christmas feast at Camelot in the opening fitt, the poet uses traditional medieval techniques of description, often slipping into superlatives, as when he speaks of "þe louelokkest ladies pat euer lif haden / And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes; / For al watz þis fayre folk in her first age" (ll. 52-54).

Furthermore, in the initial description of the Green Knight, the poet uses natural rhetorical order, describing the strange visitor's "lyndes and his lymes so longe" and

<sup>17</sup> A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 38.

so grete," and saying that his "wombe and his wast were worthily smale" (ll. 139 and 144). The knight is seen through the eyes of Arthur's knights and is, therefore, described naturally. But the knight enters the scene in *medias res*, and we are not given his lineage or even his name until the final stanzas of the poem. Conversely, the introduction of Camelot that precedes the entry of the knight begins traditionally, with a prologue tying the Arthurian court to noble Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas of Troy, starting at the beginning and working up to the time of Arthur.

Since medieval rhetoricians shunned the artful order (beginning in *medias res*), the poet manifests his adventurous spirit and lack of poetic constraint by employing such description in Sir Gawain. In his choice of the alliterative mode, the poet casts his lot with the medieval rhetoricians and their high style, and yet in his handling of descriptio the poet avoids the traditional medieval prescription. In all areas the poet appears to be eclectic, aiming always for the golden mean.

Benson contends that by the use of the natural order for describing the actions of the court and the use of the artful order for describing the actions of the Green Knight the poet establishes "a significant contrast





Knight's reproach so carefully that the reader shares the knight's incredulity and can almost condone the tone of sarcasm in his speech. The Green Knight's reproach centers on the renown of Arthur and his court. The knight refers to Arthur as "þe wyȝtest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde" (l. 261) and claims that he has heard that the court of Arthur is "kydde cortaysye." Of this use of superlatives to describe the group which has just met his entry and challenge with shock and frozen silence, Borroff says, "The diction here seems to pay a kind of ironic lip-service to qualities that are traditionally present but which have failed to manifest themselves in response to challenge."<sup>19</sup>

The poet's use of differing points of view gives the poem a certain vividness, a concreteness that is not so evident in other verse of the period.<sup>20</sup> For example, when Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel, we are allowed a glimpse into his mind. "'Now iwysse,' quop Wowayn, 'wysty is here; / Þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouer-grown " (ll. 2189-90). Through the first-hand description the reader is able to feel the desolation of the

<sup>19</sup> Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Spearing, p. 37.

place, a feat that is seldom accomplished so poignantly by omniscient description. Furthermore, the reader is allowed to feel the extent to which Gawain abhors the Green Chapel and dreads his own fate when he utters this curse: "Þis is a chapel of meschaunce, þat chekke hit bytyde! (l. 2195).

The poet intensifies the drama by allowing the reader inside the mind of Gawain and by using such powerful alliteration as "corsedest kyrk" and "Quat! hit clatered in þe clyff, as hit cleue schulde, / As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe" (ll. 2201-02) to describe the eerie sound of an ax being sharpened. Also the moving into and out of the omniscient and limited dramatic points of view alters the pace of the poem, as time moves quickly in the omniscient sections but often stops, suspended, when we see things through the eyes of Gawain or the Green Knight.<sup>21</sup> As a result of this weaving of points of view, when the characters feel or see something, we are often allowed to empathize with them; the drama becomes real and personal. The Gawain poet deviates from the time-honored romance tradition of telling a tale and instead invites his readers to feel the action of the story. These deviations indicate the poet's reaction against the

<sup>21</sup> Benson, p. 186.

characteristics of French poetry which had influenced southern English verse but not to any extent northern English verse.

The poet proves almost modern in his handling of time as a structural element in the poem. The poet uses historical time in that he chooses to tell about a time of past glory, the by-gone age of Arthur. In this respect the poem begins as any good romance, in the "once upon a time" vein. But in addition to the historical time framework, the Gawain poet uses time within the poem itself; indeed the whole poem moves along as the year passes. The year-and-one-day theme is interesting, as it correlates with the 101 stanzas of the poem. The initial scene, after the prologue that establishes the historical significance of Arthur and his court, is set at a specific time: Christmas. After the Green Knight's challenge, a year passes, "And vche sesoun serlepes sued after oþer" (l. 501). In keeping with his obviously religious nature, the poet shows the passing of time in terms of the various holy days of the year--Lent ("crabbed lentoun"), Michaelmas, and Allhallows. And the descriptio dedicated to the changing of the seasons constitutes some of the loveliest passages of the whole poem: "Colde clengez adoun, cloudez vplyften, / Schyre schedez þe rayn in schowrez ful warme " (ll. 505-06), "Blossumez bolne to



of Bercilak the temptation scenes parallel the hunting scenes in this same way, contrasting the inner conflict experienced by Gawain with the external conflict of the hunt. This simultaneous handling of events, like so many of the stylistic devices in the poem, is a modern narrative technique; Bloomfield maintains that the Gawain poet was one of the first English writers to accomplish the feat.<sup>23</sup>

But even as he employed almost modern and perhaps revolutionary stylistic devices, the poet reached deep into the past glory of Britain for his material. The poet's choice of the alliterative form and of Arthurian lore for content suggests a patriotic aim on his part. As cultured speakers of northern English were "linguistically self-conscious, aware of the peculiarly regional elements in their vocabulary,"<sup>24</sup> the poet's use of the Northwest Midland dialect and the English alliterative form suggests his commitment to the local and the traditionally English, regardless of the use by the royal court in London of the East Midland dialect and French verse forms. The use of archaic words which, "through their historic, national associations made the [Northern]

<sup>23</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal,"  
p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Borroff, p. 39.

lords feel patriotic, distinct from the court"<sup>25</sup> came from a Norse linguistic heritage which was more vital than that of the South, and in keeping these words the poet helped to preserve remnants of the native tongue.<sup>26</sup>

Further evidence of the native English tone of the poem reflecting a patriotic reaction against French influence can be seen in the choice of leisure activity described in the work. At Camelot the main activity is feasting and telling tales of great deeds of chivalry. However, at Hautdesert, the home of Bercilak, the Lord and his men ride out into the woods to hunt; they are men of action, pursuing the traditional baronial sport of the hunt. Derek S. Brewer points out that Edward III cast himself in the role of Arthur and his magnates as the Knights of the Round Table,<sup>27</sup> but Spearing sees the courts of Arthur and Bercilak as "tantalizingly suggestive of those of Richard II and of whichever lord was the poet's patron."<sup>28</sup> And as Hulbert has conjectured that alliterative poems like Sir Gawain were written by poets

<sup>25</sup> James Hulbert, "A Hypothesis Concerning the Alliterative Revival," Modern Philology, 28 (1931), 412.

<sup>26</sup> Borroff, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Chaucer and His World (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> The Gawain-Poet, p. 6.

in the employ of members of the baronial opposition to the king,<sup>29</sup> I find it easy to see a parallel between the court of Arthur and the court of either Edward III or his successor, Richard II. Whichever royal court the Gawain poet intended to use as a parallel to the court of Arthur, I believe that Sir Gawain, with its emphasis on the contrast between the royal and the baronial courts, affirms the greater virtue, vitality, and Englishness of the baronial court.

In many ways the contrast between the active, vigorous court of Bercilak and the more festive, sedentary (and more youthful) court of Arthur suggests the merits of a life of action over a life of leisure. Perhaps the Gawain poet was not only passing judgment on the royal court of his day but also anticipating the activity of the Renaissance, an age in which exploration and discovery would lead England out of its dwelling on past greatness in order to seek new glory in a rapidly expanding world.

As master poets of any era establish new literary directions and trends, so in his characterizations the Gawain poet seems to anticipate the modern trend of developing character, as the main characters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are not flat and one-dimensional as

<sup>29</sup> "A Hypothesis," pp. 406-08.

some medieval characters are; rather, they are fully conceived and well rounded characters, much like those in modern novels. Throughout the poem, we are allowed to see the main characters, Gawain and the Green Knight Bercilak, change and develop new dimensions. The poet writes about a Gawain who is renowned for his chastity as well as his courtesy; by doing so the poet completely negates the characterization of Gawain--mostly in the French Arthurian romances--as the sexual wanton. Benson sees this handling of Gawain as a stroke of independence on the part of the poet, noting that Gawain's fame had previously been founded upon his "courtesy, lechery, and treachery" and not on his courtesy, chastity, and trustworthiness.<sup>30</sup> However, in his depiction of a chaste Gawain, the poet is returning to the traditional handling of Gawain in the English romances, for many English tales made Gawain a "symbol of physical purity and abstention from sexual love."<sup>31</sup> Because the poet of Sir Gawain rejects the French degradation of Gawain's sexual morality, this more moral characterization of Gawain is further proof of the poet's desire to depart from the traditions

<sup>30</sup> Art and Tradition, p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> A. B. Taylor, An Introduction to Medieval Romance (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1969), p. 79.



of French romances and return to the "good English" traditions, in this case drawing a pure Gawain. By so doing, the poet introduces a note of irony into the plot, for while the poet acknowledges Gawain's reputation as a lover by way of the lady's conversation with him, he does not explain whether the carnal frailty of Gawain is now over and done with or whether the reputation of the knight in the French romances was always false and undeserved. Instead, the poet "throws a veil of ambiguity over both his [Gawain's] past reputation and his present conduct."<sup>32</sup> The reader is left in anticipation--will Gawain prove himself worthy of the reputation he garnered in the French romances and fall victim to the lady's bountiful charms? No set formula can be applied to the character of Gawain; traditional romance expectations will prove ineffectual.

When Gawain is approached by the lady of the castle for the third and final time, he fends off her sexual offer as he attempts to remain courteous in his words of rejection while avoiding the supreme act of discourtesy, having a sexual liaison with the wife of his host:

<sup>32</sup> M. Mills, "Christian Significance and Romance Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Review, 60 (1965), 492.



major concern, for when the lady at first offers him a rich golden ring, Gawain refuses it, saying, "I wil no giftez, for Gode, my gay, at þis tyme; / I haf none yow to norne, ne noȝt wyl I take'" (ll. 1822-23).

And even when the lady first offers Gawain the green lace, "he may þat he nolde neghe in no wyse" (l. 1836). It is only when the lady, shocked by his refusal of such an inconsequential token of her esteem, tells Gawain that the green lace has magical properties that will protect any person wearing it from being killed or injured that Gawain reconsiders his rejection of the token. When Gawain considers his inevitable fate at the hands of the Green Knight, he realizes how useful such a magic amulet might prove to him. This time, "he þulged with hir þrepe and þoled hir to speke, / And ho bere on hym þe belt and bede hit hym swyþe- / And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle" (ll. 1859-61). Thus, by cunningly appealing to Gawain's Achilles' heel--his desire to ward off certain death--the lady is able to confer upon him the badge of weakened faith.

Although he is shown attending mass and making confession and even though he carries the pentangle on his shield and surcoat and holds the image of Virgin Mary on his shield, the religious trappings do not prevent Gawain from seeking additional protection from the supposedly

magic lace. In his faith he is found lacking, and this lack of faith has intrigued critics of the poem for years. J. F. Kiteley argues that "cowarddyse" might have been behind Gawain's accepting the green girdle, calling Gawain "the knight who cared for his life."<sup>34</sup> Along these same lines, some critics maintain that it was Gawain's extreme fear of death that caused him to accept the token, and in so doing Gawain was guilty of momentarily placing man (himself) above God. But David F. Hills claims that such fear was justifiable, given the circumstances, and believes that the guilt Gawain feels about his failing proves that Gawain is better than all of the other Round Table knights, who excused his sin with laughter.<sup>35</sup>

Other critics argue that at the time Gawain accepts the lace he does not realize he is guilty of any sin, whether cowardice or faith; such critics point out that Gawain goes to confession and receives absolution directly after accepting the lace. Paul Delany says that Gawain apparently did not consider accepting the lace to be sinful and therefore did not confess it to the priest he saw

<sup>34</sup> "The Knight Who Cared for His Life," in Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 222.

<sup>35</sup> "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Review of English Studies, NS 14 (1963), 131.

prior to seeking out the Green Knight.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, as has already been noted, John Burrow maintains that Gawain did realize he had sinned by taking the lace and therefore invalidated the confession he made prior to setting off for the Green Chapel.<sup>37</sup>

Somewhere between these two opposing views, Jan Solomon sees Gawain as being guilty of the sin of "desmesure" or an excessive amount of pride and self-esteem. In this light, the acceptance of the girdle was not Gawain's sin; the excess of pride in his life and his fear of death were sins.<sup>38</sup>

When Gawain confronts the Green Knight at the Green Chapel and realizes that he has been tested and found wanting, he accuses himself of cowardice, covetousness, and untruthfulness. This excessive guilt is in keeping with the character that the poet has established for Gawain, for in all things he wishes to excel, even if he must regret to excess a sin which he has committed. Perhaps this excessive guilt is another example of Solomon's

<sup>36</sup> "The Role of the Guide in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Critical Studies, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Philology, 57 (1959), 75.

<sup>38</sup> "The Lesson of Sir Gawain," in Critical Studies, p. 275.

concept of Gawain's "desmesure." However, as the poet has established that Gawain is of a nearly perfect character, it seems quite reasonable and in keeping with that character that Gawain would be sorely grieved by his failing and therefore much stronger in his condemnation of himself than the Green Knight or the Arthurian Court were in their response to his sin. Gawain is belatedly coming to understand himself and perhaps even to question his code of values; the others know no such turmoil.

It is clear, of course, how Gawain could consider himself guilty of cowardice, for he accepted the green lace in order to protect himself from the blows of the ax. Similarly, one can see how Gawain had been guilty of untruthfulness, in that he had not given the Lord Bercilak everything (i.e., the lace) that he had received while Bercilak was out hunting. In this respect, Gawain had failed to honor the exchange-of-winnings contract set up between him and Bercilak and had therefore been untruthful. But in what way had Gawain been covetous? To fully understand this aspect of Gawain's guilt one must understand that in medieval theology there were two distinct uses of the word "covetous": one denoted a love of riches, and the other use denoted a turning away from God's love. Thus, through his cupiditas or inordinate love for

himself, Gawain exemplifies such a turning away from God.<sup>39</sup> This self-love is in keeping with the characterization of Gawain drawn early in the poem, for we are told that "Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured, / Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennournd / in mote" (ll. 633-35). Gawain is a good, courteous, and brave knight, and he is aware of these qualities in himself. But after the encounter with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, Gawain swears to wear the ill-gotten green lace at all times so that when he feels pride in his prowess at arms or his goodness of character, he will look at it and allow it to "lēpe my hert" and make him humble. Thus, by accepting the lace and becoming aware of his own frailty and his pride in life, Gawain has learned the lesson of humility.

So although Gawain accepts the magic girdle and so uses "worldly means to preserve life and accomplish knightly deeds,"<sup>40</sup> he otherwise continues to abide by Christian and chivalric rules and procedures. When the guide urges Gawain to ride away and avoid the meeting with the Green Knight, Gawain flatly rejects the offer:

<sup>39</sup> Hills, pp. 126-29.

<sup>40</sup> Howard, p. 429.

Iþaȝe he be a sturn knape  
 To stiȝtel, and stad with staue,  
 Ful wel con Dryȝtyn schape  
 His seruauntez for to saue.'  
 (ll. 2136-39)

In this statement, Gawain refuses to renege on his chivalric duty to meet the Green Knight, and he confesses a complete faith in God. Thus the enigmatic personality of Gawain is completed, for the reader is not told why the knight accepts the girdle if he has faith in God to protect him from the blow of the ax. Again, the characterization is complex; just when we think that our hero is a coward and one of little faith, he proves himself to be the truly honorable knight of Mary that we were introduced to earlier in Camelot. He rides on to meet the Green Knight, and he puts his faith in God--or perhaps he speaks in such reassured terms simply because he has the protection of the green girdle. Once again, we are left to consider the motivations and actions of the protagonist.

Similarly, we do not know why the poet chose to make Gawain the epitome of chastity when he had been portrayed as the archetypal sexual wanton in previous Arthurian romances. Nor are we told why Gawain cannot accept the fact that he has been tried and found wanting





Gawain is a man conscious of his own actions and aware of the effect that those actions may have on his destiny.

Gawain is a man of action rather than a man of contemplation. Morton Donner says that Gawain has tact and that this tact allows him to adopt the tone and manner appropriate to all of the people and situations he encounters. Further, Donner contends that tact is seldom part of Arthurian romances because it "represents a peculiarly human combination of the rational and the irrational, the serious and the comic."<sup>43</sup>

Thus, through using tact and by coming to the realization of his own shortcomings or humblesse,<sup>44</sup> Gawain still manages to emerge from the poem as a stronger man than he was at the beginning of the poem back in Camelot, and his characterization reflects this metamorphosis.

I see this characterization of Gawain as further commentary by the poet on the attitudes of his day, the end of the fourteenth century. No longer could people subscribe to the stock romance in which good was good

<sup>43</sup> "Tact as Criterion in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Papers on English Language and Literature, 1 (1965), 307-09.

<sup>44</sup> Hills, p. 130.

and evil was evil with little blurring that distinction. The Gawain poet wrote in a period when freedom of choice often determined men's action, for the feudal system was in decline, and the "new men" of the Renaissance were already on the horizon. And if the poet meant to suggest a parallel between the Arthurian court and that of Edward III or Richard II, then the ending of the poem takes on new meaning. For the courtiers of Camelot, unlike repentant Gawain, seem to fail to realize the gravity of Gawain's excessive pride and lack of faith in God. Moorman says of the court's reception of Gawain after his confrontation with the Green Knight that "The gay light tone . . . reflects the ignorance and pride of Arthur's court."<sup>45</sup> Gawain, the true English knight, accepts and repents of his own shortcomings as both a knight and a Christian; Arthur's knights undergo no such striking metamorphosis. Perhaps the Gawain poet was writing to show what moral ambiguity could result from dedication to the trappings of chivalry without the actual chivalric and Christian commitment to such a code. For Gawain is spiritually committed to the code, whereas the others appear to be only superficially committed.

But Gawain is not the only character drawn by the

<sup>45</sup> Charles Moorman, A Knyght There Was (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1969), p. 69.

Gawain poet. As interesting as the protagonist of the poem is the antagonist, the Green Knight, or Bercilak of Hautdesert. Just as the poet veiled certain characteristics of Gawain's personality in ambiguity, so did he cloak the Green Knight in mystery and ambiguity. Various critics have attempted to identify the Green Knight as the Green Man of British vegetation and nature myths, the folk-myth Wild Man, Death personified, the devil, and Christ.<sup>46</sup> Other critics, straying from the archetypal identification of the Green Knight, attempt to identify Bercilak as one of many individuals living at the time the poem was written. Among those touted as possible patterns for Bercilak are Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick; Thomas, Earl of Lancaster; Roger Mortimer; and Humphrey Bohun, Earl of Hereford.<sup>47</sup> If Sir Gawain is indeed the mirror of events experienced during the lifetime of the poet, this line of reasoning seems logical. Simone D'Ardenne is adamant on this issue, stating, "There is no denying that there exists some striking resemblance between the poetical and the historical green knights."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Spearing, p. 179.

<sup>47</sup> Hulbert, p. 418.

<sup>48</sup> "'The Green Count' and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Review of English Studies, NS 10 (1959), 121.

But what remains certain about the Green Knight is that from the sudden appearance he makes at Camelot to his arrival at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight remains eerie, supernatural, mysterious. When Gawain calls out for the master of the Green Chapel to come forward quickly and engage in battle, the reply comes from someone yet unseen, unidentified, and otherworldly, as he speaks from above: "'Abyde,' quoth on on þe bonke abouen ouer his hede, / 'And þou schal haf al in hast þat I þe hyȝt ones'" (ll. 2217-18).

The Green Knight does have supernatural qualities, for he does most certainly lose his head at Camelot and yet is able to recover it and ride away. This aspect, too, has stirred debate among critics, some of whom, like A. H. Krappe, argue that the Green Knight is clearly a supernatural being.<sup>49</sup> Brewer, however, sees the more human aspect of the knight, claiming that he is a father figure, half kind and half terrifying, a mixture of antithetical qualities.<sup>50</sup> Manning, examining the Green Knight in terms of Jungian psychological archetypes, sees the knight as the shadow, as manifested in the Green

<sup>49</sup> "Who Was the Green Knight?" Speculum, 13 (1938), 206.

<sup>50</sup> Chaucer and His World, p. 43.

Knight's animalistic qualities and love of the hunt.<sup>51</sup>

Alan Markman flatly denies that the Green Knight is either supernatural or superhuman, maintaining that he is merely a man temporarily endowed with magical powers as a result of his association with Morgan le Fay.<sup>52</sup> But it is Krappe who, after a careful consideration of the poetic predecessors of Sir Gawain and an analysis of the green color symbolism in the poem proposes that the Green Knight is Death personified and that the drama of the poem hinges upon man's instinctive fear of death. This fear of death, after all, leads to the acceptance of the lance by Gawain. Further, as it requires a knight "sans peur et sans reproche to accept his [Death's] grim challenge and to brave him,"<sup>53</sup> Gawain--as portrayed by the poet of Sir Gawain--is the ideal knight for the task.

The most profitable view of the Green Knight is to see him as a composite of human nobility and supernatural power. The Green Knight is, of course, responsible for Gawain's mental anguish, his ominous journey through the

<sup>51</sup> "A Psychological Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Criticism, 6 (1964), 167.

<sup>52</sup> "The Meaning of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" PMLA, 72 (1957), 579.

<sup>53</sup> Krappe, p. 215.

wasteland, and his subsequent temptation at the hands of the lady; or at least he appears to be responsible, until he states that the whole plot was the order of Morgan le Fay. But even without Morgan's involvement in the plot, the character of the Green Knight exhibits little that is intrinsically evil. True, when the Green Knight enters the court at Camelot he does so brusquely and without invitation. And, admittedly, he does balk at and chastize the Round Table Knights for their non-response to his challenge. But this aspect of the knight does not necessarily render him evil or supernatural; indeed, such behavior appears to be markedly human. Neither Death nor a god needs to taunt. But the humanness of the Green Knight's character manifests itself in another, more becoming, way when the Green Knight appears as Bercilak at Hautdesert.

As was previously noted, the court of Bercilak seems to treat strangers more courteously than the court of Arthur does, although later events indicate that the courtesy is only superficial. A porter greets Gawain when he arrives at Hautdesert and extends the lord's welcome. Denizens of Hautdesert bow as Gawain rides past them. Bercilak gives Gawain a magnificent room in which to rest after his tortuous journey, and the host provides Gawain with "ryche robes" of which he may choose the best to wear.

Bercilak orders servants to wait on Gawain and to serve him food, which he regards as a feast. And the lord and lady accompany Gawain to hear mass in their own chapel at evensong. Surely nothing of this hospitality would indicate the behavior of a fierce supernatural demon or even of a churl despite the rudeness of the Green Knight in other episodes.

When the Green Knight is described in a way so that he inspires fear and dread, that description is very carefully wrought by the poet-narrator. And the description is perceived through the eyes of Gawain. For example, the description of the Green Chapel is Gawain's: the place is a mound, all overgrown with weeds, set amidst rocky, barren hills, and near a running river. The scene leads Gawain to exclaim: "Wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene / Dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse" (ll. 2191-92). In this instance, Gawain associates the Green Knight with the devil, and the sound of the ax being sharpened, heard by Gawain, adds to the eeriness and otherworldliness of the place. But the behavior of the Green Knight is not demonic, nor is it as menacing as the surroundings. Although the knight swings the ax at Gawain and chastizes him for flinching, the Green Knight is certain not to inflict a serious physical injury on Gawain. Even when the Green Knight identifies himself and



tells Gawain of the plot, he does not jeer at the Arthurian knight or gloat over Gawain's flaw. Instead, he explains:

"And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen. / I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkez / On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede" (ll. 2361-63).

The Green Knight frees Gawain of their contract and even says that Gawain is innocent and a "perle" among "pese" when compared to the other Knights of the Round Table. And when the contrite Gawain confesses his sin to Bercilak, the latter merely laughs and graciously tells Gawain that he acknowledges his confession and reassures Gawain that he is "pured as clene / As þou hadez neuer forfeited syþen þou watz fyrst borne (ll. 2393-94). Bercilak even invites Gawain to return to Hautdesert with him and enjoy the festivities of the New Year.

So although the poet goes to great extremes to paint a terrifying portrait of the Green Knight, in the conclusion of the poem the knight takes on a human name and exemplifies basic human qualities. In this instance the characterization of the antagonist renders him considerably less frightening than the descriptio devoted to him. In the traditional romance pattern, the poet uses a terrible monster to challenge the hero. But the genius of Sir Gawain is that, despite the monster, the poet manages to render that monster human and decent. Unlike

Grendel or the giants and dragons encountered by other heroes of medieval romances, the Green Knight, through his characterization in Sir Gawain, becomes a "mixture of benevolence and malevolence, an ambiguous figure."<sup>54</sup>

Like Gawain, the antagonist becomes a kind of golden mean between absolute evil and absolute good. Even the recognition that Bercilak is from Hautdesert implies duality, for as Mother Angela Carson points out, desert in Middle English has two meanings: merit or becoming worthy of recompense, or uninhabited country or wilderness. Thus, the duality of the term mirrors the duality of the role Bercilak plays in the poem, for he acts as both a host of merit and as the lord of the wasteland or high desert of Hautdesert. His name draws together the various themes of the plot.<sup>55</sup> Acting for Morgan le Fay, Bercilak might be considered evil, but it is hard for me to see him in this light. Bercilak is simply helping Morgan test Gawain and the other knights of Arthur and is assisting Morgan in her scheme to frighten Guenevere.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, 29 (1962), 125.

<sup>55</sup> "The Green Knight's Name," English Language Notes, 1 (1963), 88-90.

But what is more important than the reasons behind the plot or even the method of the plot is that as a result of his acquaintance with Bercilak and the lady at Hautdesert, Gawain learns of his own spiritual and knightly frailty and is alerted to guard against the sins of excessive pride, or hubris, and too much reliance upon himself. Perhaps despite the somewhat unorthodox tactics and regardless of the goals of the testing of Gawain by Bercilak, the test contributes to Gawain's understanding of himself. Just as Job in the Bible is tried by God because he is a self-righteous man, Gawain is tried. And in each instance, the man emerges from his trial a better and humbler individual.

The characterization of the Green Knight is every bit as complex and demanding on the reader to decipher as is the characterization of Gawain. And in each instance the character develops and changes; again, the Gawain poet appears to have been much ahead of his time.

Although the other characters in the poem are not developed as fully as Gawain and the Green Knight, the characterizations of Arthur, the Round Table Knights, Guenevere, Lady Bercilak, and Morgan le Fay are worthy of mention. In these characters the Gawain poet departs, again, from the traditional portraits of these kinds of

individuals. For example, he says that both the year and the Camelot court are new and in their first age; he says Arthur "bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde" (ll. 89). Great Arthur is thus described as a hot-blooded youth who cannot sit down and partake of the Christmas feast until he has heard some marvelous story. Certainly this characterization is a departure from the romance norm, which usually depicts an aged and august Arthur presiding over a court that is solemn and dignified. But the feast scene is said to be youthful and merry. Of course, although he is young and merry, Arthur remains true to his traditional character when he belatedly stands and accepts the challenge of the Green Knight. But Arthur cannot have been the kingly superlative he is normally described as being since Bercilak is forced to inquire, "'Wher is . . . / Pe gouvernour of þis gyng?" (ll. 224-25). And even when this question is asked and even though the Green Knight looks carefully at the whole assembly in order to ascertain among them "Quo walt þer most renoun," the knight appears not to recognize Arthur. Indeed, Arthur has to make himself known to the intruder, even though he sits on a dais above most other persons in the hall.

And certainly the knights, dumb-struck by the Green

Knight's fantastic appearance and mute when the Green Knight offers his twelvemonth-and-a-day challenge, do not seem to be the proud and fearless Round Table knights of traditional Arthurian lore. The poet, who is himself neither caustic nor cynical, uses the Green Knight to comment somewhat caustically and cynically upon this disparity.

Guenevere, in keeping with Arthurian tradition, is described as beautiful:

þe comlokest to discrye  
þer glent with y<sup>3</sup>en gray,  
A semloker þat euer he sy<sup>3</sup>e  
Soth mo<sup>3</sup>t no mon say. (ll. 81-84)

But it is not long until the poet breaks with this tradition of describing Guenevere as superlatively beautiful, for he later describes the Lady Bercilak: "Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre, / And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer, / And wener þen Wenore, as þe wy<sup>3</sup>e po<sup>3</sup>t" (ll. 943-45).

Traditionally, no lady is depicted as being as lovely as Guenevere, but in this instance the lady of Hautdesert is said to be even more lovely than Queen Guenevere. So although Guenevere is not characterized *per se*, she is presented, through the description we are given of her, as lacking the superlative quality that is

generally attributed to her.

The character of the lady at Hautdesert is another fine example of the poet's willingness to experiment with character. Unlike the typical quiet lady of traditional medieval romances, the lady takes charge of the situation and even initiates--or attempts to initiate--a sexual relationship with her guest, Gawain. As was previously noted, the behavior of the lady might be viewed as discourteous, for she oversteps the normal rules of courtly etiquette when she comes into Gawain's bedroom unbidden and flatly offers her body to him. Clearly, although she is lovely in the superlative, she is not coy. She does not abide by the courtly rules and play hard-to-get. She sets out to do something, and she is almost ruthless in her pursuit of that goal. Unlike the demure ladies of traditional romances, Lady Bercilak is akin to the modern femme fatale.

Brewer sees the lady as the tender but seductive mother figure,<sup>56</sup> while Green views her as a kind of "sophisticated trollop" whose behavior toward Gawain shows a marked absence of gentillesse.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Chaucer and His World, p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> "Gawain's Shield," p. 137.



parry the urging of the lady that he tell her of true love:

Bot to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf  
 And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of  
 To yow þat, I wot wel, weldez more slyzt<sup>3</sup>  
 Of þat art, bi þe half, or a hundreth of  
 As I am, oþer euer schal, in erde þer I leue,  
 Hit were a folé . . . .

(11. 1540-45)

So the lady speaks to Gawain in the kind of periodic style that he himself uses when employing the speech of courtesy.<sup>60</sup>

Just as Bercilak could in many ways appear treacherous and evil, so the lady could be seen as treacherous and evil, for she throws herself at Gawain and eventually manipulates him so that he accepts the green lace. But just as I cannot see Bercilak as totally evil, neither can I see the lady as evil. She, as well as Bercilak, is merely co-operating with the plan of Morgan. And in her turn she helps to teach Gawain his lesson about pride and human frailty of the spirit. In this respect, the lady assumes a rather didactic role, helping Gawain to see the error of his ways. But Gawain fails to recognize the

<sup>60</sup> Clark, "Characterization by Syntax," p. 372.



merits of the lesson and attributes his whole failing to the lady and her wiles. I contend that his much-noted anti-feminine outburst is really an indication of Gawain's frustration and embarrassment and not a condemnation of the lady--or women--per se. Still the characterization of the lady, like that of Gawain and Bercilak, is modern in its ambiguity: she may be either a villain or a benevolent redemptive figure. Again, the poet leaves it to his readers to draw their own conclusions; he provides no absolutes.

Finally, there is the intriguing character Morgan le Fay, the element that many critics see as the weakest link in the poem.<sup>61</sup> Although she is described early in the scene after Gawain's arrival at Hautdesert, where she appears in striking contrast to the lovely lady, no mention is made of her identity until the closing lines of the poem. When she is identified by Bercilak as the instigator of the test, the identification is made in her absence; we never see the old lady after the initial scene in which she appears. And it is Bercilak who explains what Morgan wished to accomplish through the

<sup>61</sup> Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 35 (1960), 260.



sinister gloom about her: a pagan goddess becomes automatically a Christian demon."<sup>63</sup>

Manning, with his psychological approach, sees Morgan as the "Terrible Mother" who represents the dark side of the unconscious which seeks to destroy the conscious ego, in this case, Gawain.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, Friedman argues that Morgan cannot be seen as good, the corrector of the corrupt court of Arthur, because after Gawain returns to Camelot with news of his ordeal, neither Arthur nor his courtiers change in behavior or attitude as a result of Gawain's trials, nor do they promise to change.<sup>65</sup>

But Gawain, a knight of Arthur, has certainly changed as a result of Morgan's plot; humbled and repentant, he vows never to forget his sin of pride. And even though they laugh about the abject humiliation of Gawain, the members of Arthur's court do not totally disregard the whole episode. Instead, they pledge to wear "a bauderyk" of "bryzt grene" to remind them of Gawain's adventure and, presumably, of the excess of pride which had earned Gawain

<sup>63</sup> "Morgan le Fay," p. 267.

<sup>64</sup> "A Psychological Approach," p. 170.

<sup>65</sup> "Morgan le Fay," p. 269.

the green lace. So although the romance ends on a light note, with feasting and laughter, the courtiers have learned from the events, and they plan to remember how Gawain fell from his great renown. Surely, then, it must be conceded that Morgan accomplishes "the good." In some measure she has clarified for Gawain that he has indeed pursued a quest for self-knowledge.

Perhaps Morgan, described as an ugly old hag in the poem, is meant to represent evil itself.<sup>66</sup> The character is an enigma. But to me the final word on Morgan comes when Bercilak says: "Ȧat is ho Ȧat is at home, Ȧe auncian lady; / Ho is euen Ȧyn aunt, ArȦurez half-suster" (ll. 2463-64). This, in its duality, provides the theme for the entire work, for Morgan is a half-sister to Arthur and is Gawain's aunt just as Arthur is Gawain's uncle. The hero, and every man, is a mixture of good and evil. Morgan is not wholly evil, nor is Arthur wholly good. Over-generalization is a dangerous thing, and the Gawain poet, in his modernistic characterizations, moves away from the stock good-versus-evil motif of medieval romance and instead presents a picture of people as they really are: a mixture of the divine and

<sup>66</sup> "Morgan le Fay," p. 267.

the base, capable of great evil or great good. With his keen insight into the psychological makeup of the human individual, the Gawain poet proved that he was indeed ahead of his time and was a master of his craft. Through his drawing of rounded, fully developed characters the poet showed how stylistic devices could be made to serve meaning as well as rhetoric. Even as the poet established new literary direction in the handling of material while retaining the traditional English form, he remained an English patriot consciously employing anti-French modes in a revolutionary manner.

CHAPTER IV  
THE QUEST FULFILLED

Throughout Sir Gawain and the Green Knight the eclecticism of the poet has manifested itself. Although the poem exhibits numerous parallels with other romances from an earlier period, the poet of Sir Gawain was no mere translator but rather, as George L. Kittredge averred, an "idealist and a true poet"<sup>1</sup> who took aspects of previous tales about Sir Gawain and molded them to fit his own tale of a true medieval gentleman.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, despite the reliance of the poet upon traditional alliterative formulas of meter, syntax, and theme, Marie Borroff attests to the versatility of the poet, saying that the maker of Sir Gawain used the alliterative devices not only to construct a line of poetry but to give that line poetic power. The Gawain poet truly tailored the alliterative form to his individual art.<sup>3</sup>

As has been discussed in preceding chapters, the

<sup>1</sup> A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge, 1916; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1960), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> Kittredge, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study (New Haven, Ct.: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), p. 90.

maker of the poem tells a story that is a combination of medieval genres--romance, comedy, anti-romance, tragedy. His characters, while based on stock figures drawn from traditional Arthurian lore, develop during the course of the poem. The plot is a web of ambiguities; the poet forces the active concentration and participation of his readers in the plot. However, A. C. Spearing points out that Sir Gawain is not a pure chanson de geste in which all meaning and interpretation is left to the audience.<sup>4</sup> Rather, the poet provides ample clues in certain instances (the careful drawing-out of the religious symbolism of the pentangle on the shield of Gawain, for example) while leaving the reader to explore more ambiguous aspects of the poem (such as the real intent of Morgan's plot against Gawain). The work is a hybrid: the poet chooses to use many genres, bridging the gaps between them. Often he relies on traditional associations based on the body of Arthurian lore. An instance of this associational linkage would be his use of Morgan le Fay as the deus ex machina who is said to have masterminded the plot against Gawain. Anyone with a

<sup>4</sup> The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 170-71.

knowledge of the role played by Morgan in traditional Matter of England tales can see how the evil Morgan could fit into the scheme against Gawain. But because of the ambiguity of her intent--good or evil--even Morgan plays an enigmatic role in the poem.

Similarly, as the poet by his own avowal (ll. 30-36) writes in an ancient and in many cases archaic form, he seems to adhere to tradition. But this traditionalism is quickly deserted in his handling of point of view, descriptive technique, and characterization. He takes one-dimensional characters and renders them more rounded, more humanly ambiguous. He uses few clearly-drawn symbols of good and evil and prefers to blur the distinction between the two. In many ways, his characters are pre-Freudian composites of the good (the super-ego), the evil (the id), and the self (the ego) striving to maintain its equilibrium between the two polarities. Thus Gawain the Good temporarily wavers in his adherence to the knightly code by accepting the green lace girdle and by lying to his host. Thus also the terrible Green Knight is kind host, savior, and confessor. It seems that the poet on the one hand strives for originality and modernity and, on the other hand, continues to look backward, to an earlier time and its models. He is at once avant garde and traditional,



tailoring traditional form and content to deliver his own message and to entertain.

When the poet explores the dread and fear felt by Gawain as the year ends and the time to meet the Green Knight nears, the Gawain poet is reflecting the introspective philosophy of his own day, the late fourteenth century. He scrutinizes Gawain's thoughts and explores his psyche much more deeply than is customary in traditional medieval writings of romance. When he tells of the frightened hush of the court at Camelot when the Green Knight makes his entry, he is exploring the very nature of fear--the unknown, the strange. That he does so without the ridiculous hyperbole of the fabliau or the sarcastic sting of satire is yet further testimony to his skill.

In accepting the green girdle, Gawain admits to pride of life, fear of death, and weakness of faith. All of these problems were of special consideration in the late fourteenth century, and the man-centered philosophy of the period, boasting free will and reason as the keys to man's salvation, echoes in the poet's handling of these concerns. Through most of his trials, Gawain proves pure and guiltless, for he thwarts the advances of the lady and remains courteous in doing so. But when Gawain accepts

the lace for its magical life-saving qualities, he turns his back on his faith in God. He reasons that the lace may prevent his otherwise certain death at the hands of the Green Knight. And here, as Larry Champion points out,<sup>5</sup> the Nominalistic versus religious controversy asserts itself. But reason fails Gawain and makes him a sinner. For by accepting the lace, Gawain shows his weakness of faith (cowardice), and by failing to yield the lace to Bercilak in their exchange of winnings compact, Gawain is untruthful and perhaps covetous. Because of his lack of faith and his trust in his own human reason, Gawain invites other sins. Thus the poet shows that reason alone cannot be trusted to lead man in the paths of righteousness. He opts for the traditional, conservative view: God's grace, not man's works or reason, is the key to salvation.

But on the subject of personal choice of actions and the role which it plays in Sir Gawain, much remains to be

<sup>5</sup> "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 28 (1967), 413-25. Champion sees the poet as anti-Nominalist and Gawain as partially Nominalist, as Gawain accepts the green lace in an attempt to thwart his fate. Thus, by taking the matter into his own hands rather than relying on his faith in God, Gawain illustrates the dangers of Nominalistic reliance upon reason and freedom of choice.

explored. And yet this aspect of the poem is crucial if one is to see the operation of grace in the work. By choice Gawain accepts the challenge of the Green Knight, and by choice he repulses the advances of the lady. Choice, however, also allows Gawain to accept the girdle, and choice operates when Gawain rejects the idea offered by the guide that Gawain turn away and avoid meeting the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. And there is also the question whether God's grace, extended to Gawain despite his sin, saves Gawain from the fatal blow. Here, in the typically ambiguous style which is the trademark of this poem, no clear answer is provided. Bercilak admits that the plot was a test all along, implying that Gawain never actually faced the prospect of death, just the fear and threat of death. But why, really, does Morgan wish to test Gawain and the court of Arthur? Perhaps the test of grace is implicit in the test of Gawain's pride of life and the court's renown, for both are human qualities, achieved through human deeds. The message of the poem appears to be that grace rules over reason and free choice, and that only God's grace can save man from his own sins.

The final meeting between Gawain and the Green Knight is a Christian paradox in itself, for by seeking to keep

his life, Gawain almost loses it, and by being willing to lose his life, Gawain manages to keep it.<sup>6</sup> So even though choice does operate in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and its merits and its drawbacks are presented, no didactic sermonizing on the subject is delivered. The poet leaves it to his readers to decide if it is free choice on the part of Gawain or God's grace that saves Gawain in the final scene. And because the religious skepticism of the age had as its chief tenet the questioning of things unseen, the Gawain poet perhaps intends the faith of his readers to lead them to see the operation of grace in the work, although this grace is not empirically verifiable. Ingeniously, the poet seems to have linked the message of his poem to the central controversy in the religious world of his day: one must have faith to see the operation of grace in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight!

But the response of Gawain seems to indicate that he is not accepting the intervention of God's grace as fully and cheerfully as one would expect him to accept such a gift. Perhaps his guilt was so excessive because he

<sup>6</sup> Denton Fox, ed., Introd., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 12.

realized how close he had come to losing that grace through his reliance on his own wits and the promise of magic. By placing his faith in the things of man, Gawain turned his back on God. This realization could be the thing that makes Gawain so contrite, and both the scar and the green sash worn by Gawain are symbols that remind him of his reliance on a power superior to his own for his personal and spiritual safety.<sup>7</sup> Gawain even shares his guilt with Bercilak and the court of Arthur, thus doing public penance for his sin, and he sees his sin as grievous.<sup>8</sup> He wears the green baldric as a badge of shame,<sup>9</sup> standing for his temporary desertion of God. Gawain has learned the lesson of pride and has learned that selflessness, humility, and obedience are necessary if man is to receive the grace of God.<sup>10</sup> But why Gawain seems so gloomy when he realizes his sin and subsequent salvation through grace is not resolved in the poem. In his contrition the Gawain of Sir Gawain is an innovation

<sup>7</sup> Champion, p. 417.

<sup>8</sup> John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Philology, 57 (1959), 77.

<sup>9</sup> Spearing, p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> Champion, p. 418.

on the part of the English poet, for Kittredge says that the French poems that preceded Sir Gawain allowed no such chastizing of the hero.<sup>11</sup>

Just as puzzling as the reaction of Gawain to his guilt is the reaction of Bercilak and the court of Arthur when they see the extent of Gawain's shame. When Gawain pours out his confession to him, Bercilak merely laughs at Gawain and says that Gawain is forgiven his sin. Similarly, when Gawain the Gloomy returns to Camelot with the sad tidings of his sin, the courtiers greet his contrition with laughter. As noted, some critics contend that the laughter of Bercilak and the Arthurian court indicates that they are all less aware than the hero of the lesson of grace that Gawain has so painfully learned. Charles Moorman sees the laughter of Arthur's court as an indication of that court's failure to learn the lesson of pride learned by Gawain and believes that the laughter is indicative of the impending doom of the court.<sup>12</sup>

Other critics, like Burrow, contend that although

<sup>11</sup> A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> A Knyght There Was (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 74.

the laughter is unexpected, it is nevertheless "calculated and delicate," serving to modify the penitential tone of the dénouement and reintroducing some mirth into the tale.<sup>13</sup> Burrow is quick to add that the laughter in no way means that the court views the lesson of Gawain as frivolous, nor are they being satirical.<sup>14</sup>

When the court takes the green baldric as a symbol, they seem to accept the token as a sign of the imperfection of all men, including themselves.<sup>15</sup> Further, the baldric will serve to remind them of their need for grace and a strength greater than their own. With their acceptance of their badge and their joy in that acceptance, it might appear that the knights of the Round Table are more aware of the mercy of grace than even Gawain. Or perhaps the poet means to imply, through the speed and glee with which the courtiers accept the badge, that the others are less spiritually aware of the significance of the badge than the hero who won it, as it is always easier to learn from someone else's mistakes.

<sup>13</sup> "The Two Confession Scenes," p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> "The Two Confession Scenes," p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Spearing*, p. 230.

Again, we are not given the answer to this puzzling aspect of Sir Gawain; we are left to introspectively ponder this on our own.

Morton W. Bloomfield assesses the many ambiguities and mysteries of the poem, observing that throughout the work things are not what they seem to be and stating that "Life is a tissue of contradictions, even in its most aristocratic and idealized form."<sup>16</sup> This "tissue of contradictions" seems to be at the root of all that the Gawain poet is concerned with in the poem. He takes the major codes or value systems operating in the fourteenth century--chivalry and Catholic Christianity--and examines how each of the two codes conflicts with and contradicts the other.<sup>17</sup> Gawain is himself an example of man's inability to achieve perfection and perfectly synthesize the two codes. He seeks perfection, but he finds only imperfection, howbeit imperfection atoned by grace. Perhaps Gawain, as the incarnation of chivalric virtue, is too bound up in his human value system to realize fully the peculiarities (grace, in this instance) of a divine value system, but at the close of the poem Gawain is on his way to such an understanding.

<sup>16</sup> "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, 76 (1961), 19.



And although his free will and reason serve Gawain in most instances, the poet shows that those human faculties are not the solution to every problem. By handling the free will and free choice issues in this way, the poet shows how moderate and reasonable a thinker he is, for he acknowledges this Nominalistic modification of Roman Catholicism while at the same time focusing on its inadequacy. The Gawain poet does not avoid the issues of his day but rather capitalizes on them, allowing his tale and the reader's perception to explore the flaws and assets of each side of each issue. Consequently, ambiguity cloaks even the theme of Sir Gawain, and the poet seems ambivalent about the very romance genre which he uses as the vehicle for his tale. And yet despite a rather ambivalent attitude toward the chivalric ideal, the Gawain poet clothes his tale in the robes of romance, for romance still offers a code of conduct for life, and Castiglione had not yet produced his secular alternative to that ideal.<sup>17</sup>

Gawain's dilemma arises, in great part, from his need to live up to so many contradictory ideals (chivalric,

<sup>17</sup> Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 243.

courtly, or Christian) and even his image of himself. He becomes a kind of Christian Everyman,<sup>18</sup> attempting to live up to a diversity of ideals, and it is this diversity that causes his downfall. Had he been true to the chivalric code only, he would have been ruled by his hosts and therefore done as his hostess bade him.<sup>19</sup> But that same code, and the Christian taboo on adultery, made it impossible for him to acquiesce to the demands of the lady, for that would have entailed dishonoring his host even while obeying his hostess.

Additionally, had Gawain returned the green girdle to Bercilak in the exchange of winnings, Gawain would have proven truthful, in keeping with the Christian code. But if he had done so, he would have broken the chivalric-courtly code by disclosing the identity of his lady--and against her express orders not to do so! Therefore, because he was subject to so many systems, Gawain fails, ironically, in them all.

<sup>18</sup> William Anthony Davenport, The Art of the Gawain-Poet (London: The Athlone Press, Univ. of London, 1978), p. 190.

<sup>19</sup> Kittredge, pp. 102, 114.

And because Gawain is striving to meet the standards of many systems, that touch of irony often tinges events in the tale. When Gawain, filled with remorse because of his acceptance of the green lace, returns to Camelot and confesses his sin, the courtiers laugh. Spearing describes the returning Gawain as a "hero manqué, a would-be hero" whose aspirations to be an ideal hero have not been fully realized.<sup>20</sup> Thus, even the heroic ideal becomes ironic, as does the romance form itself.

But although there is irony in the poem, George Engelhardt contends that there was no malice in the irony of the poet, for "Gawain had resisted the flesh, he had defied the devil, he had succumbed to the world, and he had come to know himself."<sup>21</sup> And perhaps that self-knowledge is the most important lesson learned by Gawain. As a result of his painful, humiliating learning and growing process, Gawain emerges from the poem not as the best knight who ever lived at Camelot, but a man.<sup>22</sup> And Gawain the man, because of his imperfection, becomes

<sup>20</sup> The Gawain-Poet, p. 30.

<sup>21</sup> "The Predicament of Gawain," Modern Language Quarterly, 16 (1955), 225.

<sup>22</sup> Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 586.

an ideal in himself: the human synthesis of the chivalric and Christian codes. Gawain returns to Camelot not as the ideal Christian nor the ideal knight but rather as the golden mean of the two.

The poem extols the virtues of the courtly life, especially that of the baronial courts, with the poem's strong and favorable depiction of the court of Bercilak. Furthermore, the poet reflects on the psyche of the individual and the concept of self-image, in keeping with the new introspective humanism of the late fourteenth century. Additionally, Sir Gawain explores the danger of too much reliance on self and reaffirms the age-old Catholic doctrine of salvation by grace. Yet the poet still manages to accomplish all of this without the blatant sermonizing that characterizes Pearl and the other poems attributed to him. And in its blending of genres, the poet's mixture of traditional and forward-looking techniques of art, and his synthesizing of value systems, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, like the hero whose quest it traces, an example of the golden mean, an eclectic work which serves as a social commentary on the era in which the poet lived, a subtle lesson about grace, and a traditional piece of romance entertainment and artistic poetic achievement.

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